

Pestilence by dragonartist5

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Summary: Four years after the events of Season 1, Will's sickness awakens after a long remission. El, Mike, and the gang deal with PTSD, high school, and the roller coaster that is love. Meanwhile, the Gate may have reopened. And whatever happened to the other test subjects? Sequel to "Lost and Found".

1. 1987

El grips Mike's wrist with one hand, the other is shoved deep inside her pocket. Her breath swirls in little clouds of white around her mouth and nose. Mike's fingertips tap an irregular beat on her knuckles, gazing distractedly at the ticket booth. The line is ridiculously long, and it's ridiculously cold outside. Her socks are soaked through, and the slush around their feet is dirty and melting.

She presses her shoulder into his chest, more out of a desire for warmth than anything else. Mike's arms encircle her instinctively. He rests his chin on the top of her head. Dustin, swathed in a knitted scarf and two sweatshirts, rolls his eyes at them. Lucas pretends to throw up, making fake choking noises behind his hand. A smirk is painted across his face.

"Oh, grow up." Mike groans, blushing slightly. El doesn't say anything at all. Will chuckles.

"Well, while you two stay here and suck face, I'm going to get some popcorn." Dustin says, marching off with an exaggerated eye roll.

"Get our tickets, will you?" He calls over his shoulder. Mike swears under his breath, gesturing rudely at Dustin's back as he walks away. El tries to suppress her laughter, burying her face inside Mike's jacket. Lucas shakes his head, chuckling, and takes off after Dustin with Will following suit.

"Those little bastards, left us out here in the cold." Mike grumbles under his breath.

"The line's starting to move." She says, resurfacing from the jacket to look around.

"Yeah, you're right."

He keeps one arm around her as they approach the ticket booth. The sky has begun to darken by the time they make it inside the theater, stomping the slush from their shoes.

"When I find Dustin, I'm going to-"

"Murder me? I got you some popcorn, dumbass. Chill out, the movie's about to start."

Dustin, Lucas and Will appear behind them, still smirking.

Mike shrugs, cracking a grin.

"Don't expect a thank you." Mike snatches the popcorn out of his hand, shoving a handful into his mouth to make a point.

"Hey, I paid for that with my own money!"

"Thank you, Dustin." El says, patting him on the shoulder.

"Traitor." Mike says, good naturedly. He narrows his eyes in mock suspicion, then glances at his watch.

"We better go if we want good seats."

Mike grabs El's hand and pulls her forward, into the theater, which is already crowded. They manage to get seats in the far left corner, and Lucas complains loudly until Dustin smacks him on the arm and tells him to shut up.

Mike leans over and rests his head on her shoulder.

"Sorry we couldn't get great seats." He says, tiredly. El holds her breath, caresses the circles under his eyes with her fingertips. He allows his eyes to close, briefly. A lump forms in her throat as she looks at him, at the exhaustion written in his face. He is so tired, so vulnerable. And she knows some of it is her fault. She pushes the thought away.

"It's okay." She whispers, kissing him on the forehead. "You forget that four years ago I didn't even know about movie theaters. Remember the first time you ever took me to one?"

Mike bites his lip and smiles, eyes still closed. The weariness melts from his face.

"Oh, yeah. We saw *Ghostbusters*. And it was, like, totally awesome."

El chuckles, resting her cheek against his hair as the lights dim.

. . .

The movie is good. Mike, though he tries to stay awake for her sake, nods off a few times. El could've sworn she caught him snoring once.

They pile into Dustin's car and he drives them home, having just received his license a few months earlier. They file into the Wheeler house and down to the basement, peeling off their snow-caked shoes.

Mrs. Wheeler appears at the top of the stairs, wiping her hands on her apron.

"How was the movie?"

"Great." Mike tells her. She smiles.

"You guys are welcome to stay for dinner."

"Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler." Dustin says. She closes the door. Mike throws himself on the couch, tossing his jacket over the arm of the sofa.

"Don't forget about the campaign, Mike. Next Saturday." Lucas reminds him. Mike nods, rubbing his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah. I know. It's gonna be our greatest yet." He says, eyes suddenly alight.

"You're gonna be there, right El?"

"Wouldn't miss it." She said, settling cross legged on the floor. Dustin and Lucas pile onto the couch beside Mike. Will sits on the floor next to her, stretching his legs out. In lamplight, El gets a good look at his face. His eyes are shadowed, like Mike's. Maybe even more so. He is pale, his skin almost waxy. He chews on his lip. It's the first time she's *really* looked at him in a long time. He looks fragile, like he did when in those few months when she came back from the Upside Down and they met officially, for the first time.

She bites her lip, gnawing worry settling in her stomach.

"Mike, dinner!" Mrs. Wheeler calls from the kitchen. The boys and El troop up the stairs, seating themselves around the dining room table.

El lets the conversation wander, much of her attention balanced between the plate of spaghetti in front of her and Mike's hand as it brushes against hers under the table. Though it's been almost four years since she escaped the lab, she still isn't one for big group conversations. At least not in front of Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler, who she knows well enough. They are kind, and they understand a little bit, but they are adults and adults are harder to talk to.

Mike knows. He understands. He understands more than she can ever wrap her head around. He fills in the gaps for her.

She steals glances at Will. He barely touches his food, uncharacteristically quiet. Again, her mind races and the concern for him returns. Briefly. She decides against asking him if something's wrong. It might buy him some unwanted and overbearing attention. She makes a mental note to talk to him, later.

She helps Mrs. Wheeler do the dishes, a chore she is grateful for. The reparative task quiets her mind and takes the edge off. She does everything manually, not daring to risk the bloody nose or the headache. Even though she's grown considerably stronger over the years, she won't chance it. Not today, at least, and not for something as simple as washing dishes.

One by one, Dustin, Lucas, and Will bid Mrs. Wheeler a friendly goodbye and file out the door into the frigid air. When El is finished, she finds Mike in the basement. He smiles, small and soft, when she appears at the bottom step.

"I have to go." She tells him.

"I'll walk you home." He says, jumping up from the couch. His arms open and she doesn't hesitate, walking straight into them. She breathes him in.

"You're tired." She says. She can feel the rise and fall of his chest, his

heartbeat against her cheek.

"You are, too." He says, quietly. "Get some sleep tonight, okay?"

"Okay." She says, closing her eyes. A full and comfortable silence stretches between them.

"I have to go, Mike."

He takes her hand and leads her up the stairs and out the door, into the biting cold. The snow on the road is blackened and sliced open by tire tracks. Their feet follow the road. She can feel the slight limp in his leg, remaining from the bullet wound. She pushes the thought out of her head, breath catching.

"Are you done with the campaign yet?" She asks him.

"Almost. I still have a few things to sort out. Wanna help?"

El nods.

They turn the corner, and he puts his arm around her, his unzipped jacket drapes across her shoulders. It's big enough for the both of them. She closes her eyes, wearing a sleepy smile. Because he's here and he's close, and for once, everything is right with the world.

"Tomorrow after school. I need to organize my notes and stuff. We can watch a movie or something."

She nods again.

"Seriously though, El. You need sleep. Have you seen yourself in the mirror, lately?" He says, softly. He stops, hands on her elbows, turning her towards him. Their foreheads rest together. She can feel his breath on her lashes. His fingers brush the circles under her eyes, matching her gesture back in the movie theater. She returns to brief touch, grounding herself.

Touch was bad, with Papa. Papa never liked her to touch him unless he told her to. Now, in a another life, a new beginning, touch has an entirely new meaning. She understands it a little better every day. Touch is safe. Touch is her anchor. He is her anchor, in a black sea.

In a world surrounded by shadow.

"I know." She says. "You need sleep, too, Mike. You're so tired. You're always tired."

She takes a deep breath, digging her fingernails into his wrists to steady herself.

"Is it the nightmares?" He says, after a moment. She nods, biting her lip, choking on her breath. He clings to her tighter, pushing her head into his chest. The air around them stands still.

"It's my fault, Mike." She says, gasping for air. It's miraculous, really, how the world can shatter into a million pieces in an instant.

"It's my fault you don't sleep."

"That's not true."

"Friends don't lie." She snaps, because she knows. She knows the nightmares affect him too, more than he lets on. And of course, there is the small matter of their shared calls at three in the morning. Those never stopped.

She calls him when she needs him, simple as that. And if it's really bad, he shows up on her front porch, shivering in his pajamas. He clings to her, talks to her, until they both calm down enough to go their separate ways.

"If you need me, you call me." He says. Forcefully. His hand is under her chin, demanding her attention. "Promise?"

"Promise."

He kisses the space between her eyes. They continue walking, through the slush and snow melt, into the center of town.

They stop in front of her house, on the street corner. The place is a little run down, and small, but it's home. The house has a big porch with a swing, and in the spring she helps her Aunt Becky plant flowers in the several hanging pots and flower boxes that adorn the porch.

Mike wraps her in a hug.

"Get some sleep." He says, his mouth against her ear. She nods, returning his hug.

"Night, Mike." He kisses her, small and soft.

"Night, El."

. . .

She finds her mother sitting at the kitchen table, clasping a cup of tea between her hands. El leans over and kisses her mother on the cheek before taking a seat beside her.

"Mom." She says, gently, searching the older woman's eyes for any sign of distance or fear. There is only warmth.

"Jane." She says, her lips twitching into a smile. She breathes out a sigh of relief, closing her eyes for a minute. El gives her a sad smile.

"How was the movie?" She says, her voice weak but cheerful.

"Great." She says. Her mother stares into her tea, still smiling. El reaches across the table to take her hand.

Her mother is fragile. She drifts like snow. She perpetually walks on a thin sheet of ice, above the same black sea. El knows the nightmares are always there, waiting behind a veil. They are made of the same monsters that interrupt her own sleep.

El remembers the first time it happened, the first time her mom slipped away. There was a broken glass, stumbling words and a stilled tongue, a distant look in wild eyes. Papa stood in the corner. He continues to haunt them, even now. He's a demon in the walls.

Every time it happens, El fears she's losing her for good.

Something always calls her back, and of course, El is always there to pick up the pieces. It's a cycle, and one that leaves them trembling and in tears, but it helps.

El wonders where she goes, but doesn't ask. Ever. She recalls her own demons, and feels an immediate connection to her mother. Brenner's shadow bathes them both in darkness, but they'll survive it. Together.

At first, it was slow going. El didn't move in right away, but she visited several times a day. In August of '85, Becky bought this house, smack in the middle of Hawkins. Despite the corpse of Hawkins Lab, and the demons, her mother insisted they stay.

Now, they are still learning. They are healing, and catching up on thirteen years of lost time. El tells her stories, about her adventures with the boys, or ones that Mike made up just to entertain her. She reads to her mother, or braids her hair. Terry will give her a smile.

"You have school tomorrow, Hon. Get to bed." El nods, standing up. In the hall, her Aunt Becky wraps her in a hug and shoves her playfully towards the stairs. She pulls off her jacket and wet socks, crawling under the blankets. She shivers, gooseflesh creeping up her skin as she turns over to stare at the ceiling. She's tired, yet her mind races and for some reason, it's hard to breathe.

She wakes with her fingers tightening around the sheets. Her breath is like ice in her chest, heavy and sharp. She blinks, giving her head a little shake. It's dark and the window in her room is frosted and foggy. The soft, orange light from the street lamp outside falls in squares across the carpet. The air stands still. In the distance, she hears a siren begins to wail.

El detaches herself from the sheets, immediately going through the motions. Things Hopper taught her, like breathing exercises. She considers calling Mike, gazing longingly at the Super Com. It sits on her bedside table, silent and stoic. She pushes the desire away, remembering the circles under his eyes.

Tonight, the nightmares were a bit different. Distant, as if she was watching through somebody else's eyes, or through a long tunnel. It's a little familiar, though. Almost like all those times Papa told her to listen. When she was a weapon and a spy.

She struggles to remember the dream with no success.

She returns to the blankets as her heart slows, pauses to brush against Mike's mind, because she knows he probably felt the dream. At least the edges of it. Their shared nighttime disturbances go beyond the Super Com.

The nightmares have been less frequent in the recent months. They are few and far between, but when they arrive, they're terrible. Mike knows, because he gets them too. Sometimes his mind is so entangled with hers that they wake from the same nightmare, with the same, awful panic and blind fear.

He's told her all of this, and somehow, it makes her feel better and worse at the same time. Better that they can fight it together. Worse that he's taking the brunt of something that she should be dealing with on her own. It's her fault.

She closes her eyes, still sucking in deep breaths through her nostrils. She counts to five.

In and out.

In and out.

In.

Out.

. . .

She throws open the door, arms laden with her jacket and shoes, backpack slung over one shoulder, a half-eaten eggo in one hand. Mike stands on her porch. He glances incredulously at her sock feet.

"Running late?"

"Overslept."

He laughs.

"I don't believe you."

She looks at him reproachfully.

"I'm serious."

She leans against the doorframe, pulling on fuzzy boots. Mike pulls off his gloves and hands them to her. Gratefully, she pulls them on.

"Thanks." She says.

"C'mon, we're gonna be late."

She adjusts her backpack and trots after him, throwing herself into the passenger seat of Nancy's car. The oldest Wheeler girl is home from college for winter break, and she lets Mike drive it occasionally. They are out of breath by the time they race up the steps of the high school just as the bell rings. Mike pulls her into a quick hug, pressing his lips to her forehead briefly.

Did you sleep?

She pushes the question through the familiar threads of consciousness that remain near, almost entwined, with hers.

Yeah. The word is soft and muffled. Though he's always had much more trouble with the connection between them, it's grown so much stronger over the last year or two. Especially when things started to resemble normalcy. Sort of.

You?

"Yeah." He lets her go. She gives his hand a squeeze and rushes off, pushing the everyday nerves away.

She spent the better part of three years getting a haphazard and mismatched education from Joyce, Jonathan, and Hopper. Mr. Clark pitched in and so did Nancy, and the boys, of course. Hopper finally decided she was ready for public education just last year, but she was forced to wait out the entire second semester of last year, and the summer, so she could start with the rest of them. This is her first year in a real school, and while the boys are now in the middle of their junior year, Mr. Clark suggested she start as a sophomore so it would be easier to catch up. She doesn't mind at all.

She makes it to her first class on time, and, as always, throws herself

into the day's lesson. She never raises her hand, barely speaks, but she soaks it all in with an eagerness unmatched by any of her peers.

They're reading Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which she finds fascinating. At lunch, she endures Dustin's good-natured teasing and Mike blushes bright red, which makes her blush too, but she kisses him anyway. Hard. To prove a point.

. . .

The lunch bell rings, and she jogs to catch up with Will across the cafeteria. He looks at her in surprise, slows to let her walk beside him.

"What's up?" He says, giving her a good natured smile. He is considerably tall, but not as tall as Mike. She tugs on his shirt sleeve.

"Will, I need to talk to you." She swallows, squinting at him.

He turns to face her, narrowing his eyes.

"About . . . what?"

El takes a breath, twisting her fingers into her t-shirt.

"Look. You've been acting really weird the past couple days. You've been so quiet, Will. You look so tired, all the time. What's going on?"

Will blinks at her, eyes darting over her face.

"Nothing. Nothing's going on, El. Really. I have this huge Physics test Thursday, and I've been studying, and . . . Really, it's nothing." He says, biting his lip.

"I'm fine."

El searches his face, chewing on the inside of her cheek. She sees the lie in his eyes.

"Alright." She says, quietly. She takes a step back.

"Take care of yourself, Will."

He stares at the floor.

"You too, El." He meets her eyes briefly. She shivers.

"Don't worry about me."

She forces a smile, turning the corner to her next class.

. . .

After the last bell rings, El finds Mike sitting on the front steps of the school, buried in a textbook. She wraps her jacket tighter around her, plopping herself down beside him. A light snow has begun to fall.

"Hey." He says distractedly.

"D&D today?" He says, glancing up at her. She brushes the snow from the locks of dark hair that stick out from under his beanie and fall in waves across his forehead.

"Yeah."

"Well, let's get going before we freeze."

He closes the book, stands, offers her his hand. She takes it, and they trudge through the thin layer of powdered snow.

He pulls out of the parking lot, fiddling with the radio. They arrive at the Wheeler house in mere minutes. In the kitchen, Holly greets them dressed in a little apron patterned with cherries.

"I'm making cookies." She says, cheerfully.

"Good. I'm starving." Mike says, peeling off his jacket. El smiles as seven year old Holly trots up to her and hugs her around the middle, before handing her a still-warm chocolate chip cookie.

Mike grabs El's wrist and directs the cookie towards his mouth, taking a bite. She smacks his arm away, glaring at him.

Holly rolls her eyes, something she undoubtedly picked up from Nancy. El can barely contain her laughter at the sight.

Mrs. Wheeler walks into the kitchen, smiling when she sees El.

"Hey, El. What are you two up to?"

"D&D campaign, I have to get it done by Saturday." Mike says, around a mouthful of cookie. Mrs. Wheeler's eyebrows shoot up.

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Michael. And homework first." She gives him a pointed look.

"Alright, alright." He says, knowing it's pointless to argue. He grabs El's hand, dragging her down the basement steps.

In the basement, El and Mike sit on the couch. She is buried in *Julius Caesar*, nose almost brushing the pages. Mike gnaws on his pencil, struggling through a pile of Physics homework.

Holly comes down the stairs to join them, beginning to work on a new coloring book. She, too, chews on the end of her pencil, something Mike is notorious for. El watches her from across the room, smiling a little. She sees both Nancy and Mike wrapped into the youngest Wheeler. It's amusing.

When Mrs. Wheeler calls Holly upstairs, El finally voices the thoughts that have been eating her from the inside.

"Do you think Will is acting weird?"

"What do you mean?" He looks up from his paper, meeting her gaze.

"He's been really quiet lately. Like, quieter than usual. He's got those big circles under his eyes. I don't know. He's just not like himself."

Mike nods.

"Yeah, I guess I've noticed that. I figured it was just that test we have coming up."

"He already gave me that excuse."

"Well, there's your answer. He's just worried about it. He probably stayed up late studying."

"He was lying." El says, quietly. "I know he was lying. Something isn't right."

Mike swallows, giving her a hard look.

"I don't know, El." His eyes drop back to his paper, but his pencil is still. She knows he's thinking about Will. Concern for their friend, and curiosity, festers in the back of her own mind. She doesn't bring it up again.

After a few hours, Mike throws his homework aside, falling against El. He sighs loudly.

"I'm done." He says, voice muffled.

"Me too." She says.

"D&D?"

"Food first?"

"Agreed."

She perches herself on the counter as Mike makes popcorn in the microwave. He pulls a jar of peanut butter out of the cabinet and two spoons.

"God, I love this stuff." She says, taking the jar from his hands and scooping some into her mouth with her finger.

"Don't let my mom see you do that, she'll have a cow." He warns.

El sucks in a breath.

"Oops."

"It's okay. Let's go back to the basement."

"So, what do you have left to do?" She asks him, making her way down the steps.

"I have to figure out this one part . . . we go into this forest, and there are trolls there, but I feel like I've used trolls so many times already."

So, I'm looking at bringing in a new monster, but to do that I need a whole new plot twist . . ."

He trails off as they reach the basement, looking at her.

"What about the Demogorgon?" She says, the corner of her mouth twitching into a smirk.

"Never again." He says, putting his hands on her shoulders. She wraps her arms around his neck, laughing a little. He shakes his head, grinning widely.

"Never again."

. . .

Her eyelids begin to drop as she sorts through another page of scrawled notes, trying to distinguish one from the rest. She's supposed to be weeding out mistakes and sorting the notes into something resembling a plot line. Mike is working on a map, penciling in the names of various places in his newest, greatest realm.

The quiet is calming, and she leans against him so their shoulders press together, covering her yawn with her hand.

"What do you think about this? Listen, I start with the Thessalhydra, which hides in the cave right . . . here." He points to the place on the map. She nods, following his thoughts.

"They can avoid it by cutting through the forest, but it's actually a trap" He rambles on, and she closes her eyes for a moment, watching the campaign as it plays out in his head. It's haphazard and messy, but it's beautiful. It's growing and rewriting itself, and it will be his greatest yet.

"I think . . . you need a break. It's really good, Mike. It's great, but we've been at it for hours." He rolls his eyes, trying to conceal a yawn.

"Tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay."

He sets the map aside, leaning back. She reaches for the remote, turning on the T.V. *The Empire Strikes Back* comes on, only a few minutes in. He stretches himself out on the couch. She makes herself a nest of blankets on the floor. They're quiet for a long time, watching the movie.

"YouwannagototheSnowBallwithme?" His words blend together as he blurts the question. El props herself on one elbow, squinting at him.

"What?"

Mike sits up, looking at her. His expression softens, and he bites his lip.

"Do you . . . want to . . . go to the Snow Ball . . . with me?" He says, slower this time. He swallows hard, cheeks reddening. El sits up, giving him a wide grin.

"Mike, are you kidding? Of course!" She says. He smiles, starting to chuckle. She giggles.

"Oh, good." He says, leaving the couch to join her on the floor. She leans into him.

"I think it's supposed be at the end of this month." He tells her, planting a kiss on her forehead.

She recalls another time, another mention of the Snow Ball. That time, though, she was dying on a table in Mr. Clark's science classroom. It seems silly that they'd never gone before, despite the fact that he'd asked her almost four years earlier.

El continues to grin to herself. She'd have to buy a dress and shoes and there'd be music and dancing . . .

"I was worried you were gonna say no." He says. She shoves him playfully.

"Technically, I already said yes." She reminds him.

"Four years ago!"

"I meant it."

They had their own Snow Ball in the basement, mid January, 1985. Dustin, Lucas, and Will were there, too. Music blasted out of Jonathan's big speaker that he let them borrow. They danced, albeit a little awkwardly, but that was okay because El wasn't really good at dancing either. She spent most of her time giggling uncontrollably at their antics.

They were joined by little Holly, who'd gripped El's wrists and they spun around in big circles, laughing. The boys managed to play a little bit of D&D and Atari, until they were all consumed by an intense pillow fight that lasted long into the night. El swore it was the most fun she'd ever had in her entire life.

And Mike found himself watching her, watching the way she laughed as she danced with his baby sister Holly, barefoot in the basement. Watching the way she blushed when they held hands, even though they always held hands, but somehow it was different that night.

They're really going this time. To the real thing. Mike can't keep his mind off the dance all through the first part of the movie. He can't keep himself from replaying things in his head. They've come so far, and he knows it. And she's not dead or stuck in the Upside Down or locked up in that . . . lab . . . and he's so happy. She's here and she's his and they're really going to the Snow Ball. Together.

Her hand finds his. After a while, his thoughts slow down. His brain becomes syrupy and sluggish. She, too, struggles to stay awake, watching the movie through half-closed eyes.

Mike's breathing slows, his head falls against her shoulder. She feels herself falling asleep and allows it, because his presence is warm and she's seen the movie a thousand times and they're finally going to the Snow Ball.

. . .

Nancy shakes them awake, wearing thick red lipstick and a long, black jacket. El jumps to her feet. She smirks, arms folded over her chest.

"I almost ran upstairs to get Dad's camera." She says. Mike blushes bright red.

"What's all this about?"

"We were working on a campaign." El tells her, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks.

"Sure." Nancy says, voice dripping with skepticism. She clicks her tongue.

"Where were you?" Mike says, changing the subject.

"The movies. With . . . Jonathan." She says. Mike wiggles his eyebrows.

"When's the wedding?" Nancy rolls her eyes, letting out a long sigh.

"Jesus, Mike, it's one date."

"Sure." He stands, grabbing El's hand.

"I'll drive you home."

A/N: This is a sequel to the story I completed back in November, "Lost and Found". I know the time jump is a little weird at first, and the plot will definitely diverge from what we already know about Season 2. Bear with me. This is purely for my (and your) entertainment. Please R&R, all of your comments and critique are very much appreciated.

2. Roll the Dice

"Will the Wise is burdened by a mysterious disease. The fever has made him deranged, a madman. He ran off, and the Proud Princess has gone to rescue him. They haven't seen her in a day. King Tristan sends the Party off, to look for their lost brothers. They hear news of disturbances near a mountain range in a distant land. There's a cave in the North. Some say it holds the cure to the pestilence that plagues Will the Wise. Some say evil lives there . . . The remaining members of the Party make a treacherous journey. After several days of exhausting travel, they arrive." Mike says, looking around at the four of them.

They are crowded around the table in the basement, immersed in Mike's latest, greatest campaign. A greasy pizza box containing a single, cold slice of pepperoni lies forgotten on the floor. Empty soda cans are scattered about the room.

Dustin has taken to pacing the length of the room fretfully, tugging at his hat. Mike is stooped over his Dungeon Master's manual and a collection of crumpled pieces of paper, eyes flicking over his hastily written notes. His knee bounces agitatedly, making the table shake.

"You enter the cave, quickly. As you continue deeper into the cavern, it gets harder to see. Ahead of you, a huge, gaping hole awaits . . ."

"Is it a portal?" Dustin yells, looking anxious.

"Shut up." Lucas hisses, through gritted teeth. He turns to Mike, fidgeting in apparent excitement. "Go on, what is it?"

Mike rolls his eyes, but he's grinning.

"It's a portal! Will the Wise and the Proud Princess stand near it. It's sucking you in! Will, your action!" Mike yells. Will blinks, surprised.

"Uhh. . . I . . . stuff the portal in my Bag of Holding?" He says, unsure. Mike shakes his head.

"That won't work. The Bag of Holding is forever lost in the portal's

perilous depths. Sorry, Will . . ." Mike thumbs through his notes. "Ummm, the party watches, terrified, as Will the Wise disappears inside the portal. And . . . oh no! The Proud Princess is in danger, too. She's getting sucked in! You have to save her! Dustin, your action!" Dustin shifts, eyes flicking to his friends' expectant faces.

"Uh . . . uh, I . . . try to go into the portal to bring them back?"

"Dude, what? That's too risky." Lucas groans, slapping his palm across his forehead. "You need some kind of protection. What if there's something bad in there?"

"Oh, right. Uh, I'll use my Ring of Protection and investigate the portal."

Mike nods.

"You continue toward the portal with the Ring of Protection. Wait, uh oh . . . it closes suddenly. The Proud Princess is trapped inside! You feel along the wall of the cavern, but it's just stone. The portal has disappeared . . ."

"What the hell . . . what do I do?!" Dustin yells, yanking on his hat in agitation. El giggles. Mike is grinning. Lucas swears under his breath.

"Inside the portal, Will the Wise and the Proud Princess are stuck in . . ." Mike drums his fingers on the table. "The Vale of Shadows!"

Lucas groans, nervously chewing on a fingernail. Will gasps, eyes wide.

"No . . ."

"Will and the princess search for a way back. But it's dark . . . you hear rustling in the brush to your left. The Proud Princess steps forward to investigate and comes face to face with three travelers. They are lost, and weak from being trapped in the Vale of Shadows for so long . . . they warn you of a new threat. Then, you hear it . . . a monster. It crashes through the mossy trees, towering above you-"

"What is it?" Will yells, looking at Mike fearfully.

"It raises it great, lizard-like head and sniffs the air . . . the Tarrasque." The boys shout in protest. Lucas throws up his hands, cursing.

"What?! Hell no . . . We're in deep, deep shit right about now." He says, literally tearing at his hair. Lucas laughs, maniacally. Mike fidgets in his chair.

"It smells your pungent, human scent!" Mike yells. "It comes toward you. Boom . . . boom . . . BOOM!"

"Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit." Will says, looking at the die.

"Will, your action?"

"What do I do?" He says, weakly, looking at the others for help. Dustin shakes his head, shrugging his shoulders. Lucas sucks in a breath.

"Uhhhh, try the biggest baddest spell you have?"

"But he's got Spell Resistance. . . "

"I can only cast fireball . . . or protection . . ."

"Fireball him!"

"But . . ."

"Fireball him!"

Will takes the dice, rolls. Eight.

"Shit!"

"The Tarrasque, rearing up. The Proud Princess jumps to your defense. The three travelers, too, come to your aid . . ." Mike pauses, searching for his notes. "Meanwhile, new portals are opening outside of the Vale of Shadows. Dustin the Dangerous and his comrades arm themselves to fight as several monsters spill from the portal openings all around. Most of them are Troglodytes and weaker beings. Still, they pose a threat. Some of them crawl into the rivers, and they are

spread all over the realm. The Party must hunt them down. Dustin, you find yourself cornered by a Giant Slug. Your action . . . "

"I . . . cast . . . a delayed blast fireball." Dustin says, holding his breath as the die tumbles across Mike's board. He sighs with relief as he comes off lucky.

"You cast a delayed blast fireball. The slug explodes into bits of slime and goo . . . "

Mike runs a hand through his hair, glancing at El. She smiles, giving him an encouraging nod.

"Back in the Vale of Shadows, the princess and our three mysterious travelers help Will the Wise as he attempts to defeat the Tarrasque. They have powerful spells of their own. The monster is greatly weakened. Will steps forward to deliver the final blow . . . " Will looks at the four of them, then down at the die in his palm.

"Here goes nothing . . . "

It rolls across the board. The number eleven faces up. It burns itself into their eyes. Mike raises his eyebrows. El just laughs.

"Well, what a coincidence . . . " She says, grinning. Mike chuckles, incredulous. He launches back into the story, barely missing a beat.

"Despite his sickness, Will the Wise has just enough strength to cast the last offensive attack. The Tarrasque withers, defeated, and blood leaks from the many wounds in its armored skin." Mike says, slamming his hand on the table. The boys roar in triumph. Lucas jumps up and down, clapping Will on the back. Dustin wraps his arms around El's middle and hikes her onto his shoulder, parading her around the room. She can't seem to control her laughter. Will pumps his fist in the air, eyes alight. Mike talks faster, grinning broadly.

"The force of its defeat is enough to open a portal near Will the Wise and the others. They escape, bringing the three travelers with them, to safety. The Party, tired from defeating so many monsters, is glad to see them. The portals close, and the realm is once again safe

from the horrors of the Vale of Shadows . . ." Mike slams his manual shut, for emphasis.

"We defeated the Tarrasque!"

"You rewrote it." El says. Mike nods, sheepishly.

"Yeah. I don't know why. The idea just . . . fell into my head. It felt right. Ya know?"

El nods, amused. Mike kisses her cheek, lightly.

"Goodnight, El."

They're standing on her porch. She gives his hand a small squeeze.

"Night, Mike."

She makes her way over the threshold, giving Mike a little wave before she closes the door. Inside the entryway, she leans against the door, fingers still grasping the knob. Her smile quickly fades, though, as she mulls over the campaign. The Vale of Shadows . . . Will the Wise's odd pestilence. . . a portal? It's oddly familiar, and all of sudden she's thinking of the dark circles under Will's eyes and his aura of exhaustion.

She bites her lip, pushing the foul thoughts away. An odd coincidence indeed . . .

A/N: Please forgive the fact that I know next to nothing about D&D. I created this scene based off of the few scenes included in the show and some very minimal research online. As always, R&R. Critique and comments are appreciated. I will be updating frequently.

3. Life As We Knew It

The success of his campaign keeps Mike in a good mood for the rest of the week. Miraculously, his teachers lighten the homework load a little bit. On Tuesday, he meets Lucas and Dustin outside of the Palace, Hawkins' only arcade. He smiles when he sees them, clapping Lucas on the back.

"Oh my God, I thought I'd never get a break. Mrs. Johnson has a huge stick up her butt." Dustin says, rolling his eyes.

"Totally." Mike says, nodding. He pushes the door open, and the three of them race for a spot at the best games.

"Oh my God, I forgot to tell you guys, ya know Max?" Dustin asks as they make their way to the far side of the arcade. Lucas immediately starts up an intense round of *Pac-Man*.

"That red-head chick in our English class? Yeah. What about her?"

"I asked her to the Snow Ball and she actually said yes!" Dustin says excitedly, grinning broadly.

"Woah. Haven't you had a crush on her for, like, ever?" Lucas says, not taking his eyes off the screen.

"Yeah."

"Nice work, man." Mike says, clapping Dustin on the back.

"That reminds me, when are *you* gonna ask El?"

Mike raises his eyebrows.

"I already did."

"What? You never told us!"

"I thought you knew . . ." Mike says, looking perplexed. Lucas and Dustin shake their heads, smirking. "I guess I forgot to tell you." He shrugs.

"Well? What'd she say?" Dustin presses him, wiggling his eyebrows. Lucas flicks him.

"Dude, she obviously said yes. They've been dating for like three years." Lucas makes a sappy, sort of terrifying expression that Mike dearly hopes he will never see on his friend's face ever again.

"She said yes." Mike confirms, grinning sheepishly. His mind wanders to familiar thoughts of El, dancing and laughing with him, wearing a pretty dress . . .

"Where's Will? I thought he was coming with us?" Dustin says, looking up from his game so suddenly it gives Mike a start. He glances at the door. A couple of middle school kids push past them, arguing loudly, and Lucas lets out a long groan as he loses his game.

"What did you say, Dustin?"

"Will was supposed to meet us here."

"He told me after school, he isn't coming. Said he had to do some shit for his mom."

"Oh." Mike says, returning his attention to *Donkey Kong*.

"Do you think he's acting weird?" Lucas says, expression turning stony. Mike gives Lucas a hard stare, chewing on his lip.

"I mean, he didn't show up to school yesterday. He didn't tell us why. Something's up with him, ya know?"

Mike nods, and El's voice echoes in his mind.

"El mentioned it last week. She said she asked him about it. She said he lied to her. He told her he was stressed out about that Physics test we had last week. But that test is over, and he's still acting different."

Dustin raises his eyebrows, eyes still glued to the screen as he advances to next level of *Frogger*.

"Dude, El can, like, read minds. If she says Will lied, he lied. And Will never lies. You think we should be worried about him?"

Mike shakes his head, feeling his stomach twist uncomfortably. His fist clenches around the joystick.

"I dunno."

. . .

Mike's mind races as he climbs into Nancy's car and starts the engine, pausing to run his hand through his wild mess of dark curls. It doesn't take him long to get home.

He stomps the snow from his shoes and opens the door. His mom's voice rings from the kitchen, followed by an angry retort that undoubtedly belongs to Nancy. He sighs, taking off his shoes so as to climb the stairs undetected. He reaches his room and closes the door, throwing his backpack on the bed.

He picks up the unfinished book review he should be working on for Honors Lit., stretching out on the bed. The place above his knee gives a familiar twinge as he extends the muscles, and his fingers find it instinctively. It's an ugly wound, a big white lump of scarring. It's been almost three years, and still, it bothers him from time to time.

He makes the pencil move across his paper, but his mind wanders elsewhere. El gives him a familiar push, one he returns cheerfully. He closes his eyes, practicing with the connection. She's been encouraging him, trying to get him to strengthen his mind. He makes his way along the blurry boundaries, feeling her consciousness as a whole. He can imagine her mind, like a beautiful, smeared mess of color and light. The only thing he can see or feel in an endless abyss of are sharp edges and shadows, but there is delicacy too. There are pulses of energy, thoughts that weave together like fabric, or change like water and waves.

He wills himself to look through her eyes. He sees her room. He sees the squares of light on the carpet, the soft green paint on her walls, and the gigantic Star Wars poster he bought her just last year. He's getting better.

She opens up to him like a flower opening to the sun after a particularly long winter. Her mind latches onto him for support, as if

he's the only thing keeping her steady. Like she's spent her whole life unbalanced and dizzy, tossed about in a storm. Which she has. Sort of.

He returns his attention to his paper, but soon tires of it and sets it aside. He pushes his head back onto his pillow, staring at the ceiling. He chases his thoughts around until his mom calls him downstairs for dinner.

. . .

Will's face, a blood trail through the Hawkins Middle gymnasium, and El's mangled corpse are featured in tonight's installment of nightmares. The horrid images are agonizing, and they flash before his eyes like a roll of film, a series of nightmarish freeze frames. He can't hear his own voice. He suffocates, sinks to his knees.

Mike wakes, drenched in a cold sweat. He scrambles out of bed, throwing open his bedroom window. He sucks in a great breath, slumping against the wall. He tries to blink the black spots from his vision.

It wasn't El's nightmare. It was something entirely his own. He recalls Will, shadowed and weak and deranged, and he shivers.

Mike crosses the room and walks out into the carpeted hallway. He tiptoes down the stairs, silent on sock feet. In the kitchen, he pours himself a glass of water, wiping the cold sweat from his forehead. He counts his breaths. He is wide awake. Still gripping his glass of water with white knuckles, he pushes open the door to the basement and makes his way down the stairs. The clock reads 3:06 AM.

He paces the floor, glancing at the clock every few minutes. His mind races, and his body hums with adrenaline.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Mike calls up Will's image. His friend's hallowed, pale face is clear in his mind.

Do you think Will is acting weird?

El's voice, twisted and knotted with fear for their friend.

Do you think Will is acting weird?

Lucas, exchanging worried glances with him in between games of Pac-Man.

Mike shakes his head, trying to clear it. He hates this feeling, this cold, sick worry. He should've talked to Will. He should've said something. He recalls the past month, realizing this has been going on for almost three weeks. Back upstairs, he picks up the Super Com and switches it on with shaking fingers.

"Will?"

There's the disappointing crackle of static, then silence.

"Will, it's Mike. Do you copy? Over." He slams the Super Com down on his bedside table.

"Will it's Mike, do you copy? Will? Will, answer me. Over." Nothing.

"Dammit, Will." He growls, running his hand through his hair. Heat rises to his cheeks as a sort of panic sets in, squeezing his chest. Why is this *just now* starting to worry him?

"Mike?" He whips around, staring at the Super Com.

"El?"

"What's going on? You alright?" Her voice, tinged with worry, is interrupted by short bursts of static. He sits on his bed, pinching the bridge of his nose to relieve some pressure.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Everything is fine. Go back to sleep."

"Friends don't lie." She reminds him.

He forces a laugh.

"Mike, what's wrong?"

Nightmare. He responds without speaking.

Want to talk? Her response is immediate.

"No. No, I'm okay. It's just . . . Will. I think you're right. There's something up with him. He didn't show up to school yesterday, and when he came today he looked . . . bad. He looked really bad."

El brushes against his consciousness, and he feels some of the weariness fade.

"We need to talk to him. It's almost . . ." Mike swallows hard, gripping the Super Com with both hands. "It's almost like he was when he came back from . . ."

"The Upside Down." She spits the words venomously.

"Yeah."

"Tomorrow." She says, giving him a little push. "Tomorrow, we'll talk to him. Together."

Promise?

Promise.

. . .

Will doesn't show up to school that next morning, nor the day after. Thursday afternoon, Mike finds El leaning against the flag pole, waiting for him. He gives her a quick kiss on the cheek, and they set off through the thick snow fall.

"I don't have Nancy's car today, so we have to walk." He tells her, taking her hand. She gives him a smile, presses her hip against his leg.

"Okay."

The walk to the Byers' house is long, especially with all the snow on the roads. It keeps getting into his boots, soaking his socks and numbing his toes. El keeps her arms around his waist, gritting her teeth at the cold. They talk about the Snow Ball for a little while, until their conversation lapses into comfortable silence. The sun begins to sink, staining the sky a soft orange.

They reach the Byers' house after dark. Mike marches up to the door, hammering on it with his fist. After a few seconds, Joyce opens the door. She is dressed in her work clothes, her hair pulled back in a messy knot. She grips the collar of the Byers' big, scruffy dog. The mutt wags its tail, barking excitedly. El drops to her knees and reaches out to pet him, grinning widely as the dog lunges forward and licks her face. Joyce offers Mike a soft smile.

"Mike! El! What can I do for you?"

"Is Will here?"

She bites her lip.

"Yeah, he's in his room. He's sick. I think he has the flu."

"Can we talk to him?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . It's probably best if you don't. He needs his rest, and I don't want you to catch something."

"We really need to talk to him." Mike says, a little desperately. El gets to her feet, taking his hand without really thinking about it. Their fingers lace together instinctively.

"Is there something wrong, Mike?" Joyce asks him, quietly. She gives him a hard stare. Mike meets her eyes for a moment, then he drops his gaze to their clasped hands. He feels El shift uncomfortably beside him.

Mike doesn't want to worry Joyce Byers. Not after everything her family has been through. Even after four years, Joyce still has panic attacks and anxiety issues. The doctors call it Post Traumatic Stress. Nancy had mentioned it. Jonathan mentioned it. The last thing he wants to do is plant *that* seed.

"No, nothing's wrong. Tell Will we came by, okay?" He says, forcing a smile.

"Of course."

. . .

Will does not come to school on Friday. While everyone else at school are scrambling to find dates for the Snow Ball, Mike is scrambling to figure out what's going on with his friend. He exchanges worried glances with his friends as they walk to their first class. When he voices his concerns, Dustin and Lucas try to reassure him.

"Dude, he's just sick. He'll probably be back on Monday." Lucas says. Dustin nods in agreement, though both seem a little weary.

Mike sees the stress in El's eyes, the worry. They both know this isn't some sickness, that this has been going on for far longer than a few days. Everything inside his head screams for answers.

She's unusually withdrawn and quiet during their walk home. Her hands shake, so he grabs ahold of them.

When they reach her house on the corner, she turns around to face him. She gives him a hard stare. Her eyes are glossy, like she's fighting back tears.

"Mike."

"El." He says, quietly. She's battling with herself. He can feel the conflicting emotions, and he tightens his grip on her hands.

"Something's wrong." She says, biting her lip. She bursts into tears.

"El." Mike whispers, pulling her into his arms.

"Talk to me." He says. He fights to keep his voice steady. She shakes her head, taking a few deep breaths. She sucks in air through her nostrils, suddenly breaking from his embrace. She wipes her nose with her sleeve.

"I have to go."

"El . . ." He starts, taking a step toward her. She steps back, pushing him away.

"See you tomorrow." She says, with a ghost of a voice. Her back is turned to him. He tugs on her sleeve, but she wrenches her arm from his grasp.

"El, wait." He says, following her up the steps.

She shuts the door in his face.

Mike stops in his tracks, as if she'd just slapped him in the face. He stands, hand resting on the door for who knows how long, heat rising in his cheeks, forcing himself to remain steady. It happened so fast, and he fights the urge to bang on the door, to follow her inside. He doesn't.

"Fuck." He swears to himself, turning around, dragging himself down the steps. "Damnit, El."

He kicks himself, replaying the whole exchange over and over again in his head. It's not like her. It's *not* her. It's *not* her. Something is wrong. Something is definitely wrong. And he can't fix it. He can't help her.

By the time he makes it home, tears are threatening to fall onto his cheeks. He slams the front door behind him, taking the steps two at a time.

He's frustrated. Sixteen year old guys aren't supposed to cry. Not like this. Not over girl trouble, if you could even call it that. What he has with El . . . it's different. Simply calling her his girlfriend seems like too simple of a word, too much of a petty label.

"Michael?" He can hear his mother's voice from the living room. He ignores her, wiping his eyes furiously.

He shuts his bedroom door, quieter this time, praying she won't follow him. He grabs the Super Com, sinking to his knees.

"El." He says, loudly. His emotions are out of control. He's shaking.

"El. El you need to talk to me. Tell me what's wrong." He tries to give her a mental push, still wiping his eyes.

"Damnit, El. El! Talk to me."

No answer, only the fucking static and the radio silence. Mike knows she's listening. She's always listening, always there. But for the first

time in a long time, there's some distance between them. She's there, but she remains out of reach. It tears him apart.

He doesn't know how to fix this.

4. Bleeding Noses, Bleeding Knuckles

She sinks to her knees at the foot of the bed, choking on her own tears. Her whole body shakes, and she curls her hands into fists to hold on as the world careens out of control.

She feels the familiar numbness, the uncontrollable fight for oxygen. She's drowning, and the room around her dissolves.

White tiles. Blood. Papa peers at her from the doorway, long fingered hand resting on the knob. His thin mouth curls into a grimace.

"You must obey my instructions, Eleven. You disobey me. You must be punished."

El is back in her twelve year old body, still trembling, vision clouded with tears. She doesn't understand. She wants to obey him, but she does not want to hurt that man. That man, who screams and bleeds and begs for her mercy. Papa wants her to hurt him. If she hurts him, she is a good girl. He tells her she is a good girl. She thinks Papa is wrong. If she hurts that man, then she is killer. She is bad. She is *very* bad.

Papa slams the door, and she is tossed headfirst into complete darkness. The walls seem to close in on her, and she is once again reminded that her life is worth nothing. She's animal, a beast that must be caged. She sinks to her knees, hospital gown rough against her fragile skin. She can hear the man's screams, even now. She can feel his fear. The air tastes like blood.

El resurfaces, back in her bedroom, back on the carpeted floor. She wipes her eyes with shaking fingers, leaning her head against the bed.

Papa used to bring her things. A little stuffed lion. A potted plant. He brought her little candies and sweets when she was a good girl. Once, he brought her music. It was a small machine, a record player. It played the most beautiful music. It was her favorite gift. When he

brought her the man, and she didn't hurt him like she was supposed to, he took the music away. She wasn't allowed to have music ever again.

She's on her feet, tongue sweeping briefly over her lips, tasting the tears. Her fingers brush the surface of a different vinyl, one she received for her fifteenth birthday.

She killed that man, after she spent so long in the room. In her prison cell. Papa brought her out, and she hurt him like she was supposed to. She made him suffer while he screamed and cried like adults aren't supposed to cry. The men in white suits wrote down everything he said. After they were finished, Papa asked her to kill the man. She did as she was told.

She closes her eyes. The vinyl beneath her fingertips cracks in two. She feels the familiar warmth on her upper lip, doesn't wipe it away. In the window, she catches sight of herself. The shadow that stares back at her is alien. She regards her reflection, searching those haunted eyes, wondering how this could've happened.

She was better. Mike and the boys and Joyce made her better. She was almost normal, for a while. And now she's going backwards. Reversing to the twelve year old experiment that escaped Hawkins Lab so many years ago. It happened so fast.

It's hard to breathe. She slumps against the wall, letting the blood drip into her open palm. She watches it pool into the creases in her hand, sliding gracefully down the slope of her wrist.

"El." The walkie talkie hums to life with a pop of static. She opens her eyes, gazing at the little red light.

"El, El you . . . to talk to me. Tell me what's . . . wrong." She doesn't move, doesn't make a sound. Her heart breaks. A stab of guilt climbs up her throat.

She is afraid. Whatever is happening to Will, it scares her. And somehow Papa and the Upside Down seem closer. She feels the change. She can feel the shadows pressing on her from all sides. She's fragile.

It's reminiscent of Before. Before the incident, before she returned from the Upside Down. Before she was given a new name and a new life. It's like she's becoming sick again after a really long remission.

"Damnit, to me."

El picks up the walkie talkie, bites her lip, sets it down again. She runs her hands through her hair, which now falls just past her shoulders.

She can't explain what she feels, only that she knows the less she tells him, the better off he will be. If the Upside Down really is affecting Will, affecting her, she wants Mike as far away from it as possible. If the darkness is there, if the Gate is open again, she doesn't know if she can save herself. But she can save him.

And she can help Will.

She bites her lip, pushing such terrible thoughts away. She closed the Gate. The Demogorgon is dead.

Right?

El runs through the list of all the clues throughout the past few weeks.

Will's haunted eyes. A resurgence of nightmares. The way she can feel the darkness, even now. Even here, in her own bedroom. It's what pushed her to a breaking point today. It's all too familiar . . .

She crawls under the blankets, letting her breathing return to normal. She wipes the blood from her upper lip, staring at the walkie talkie from the crack in the sheets. Mike tries to contact her several more times, then the device falls silent. His words are choked with tears, and it takes a great amount of self-control to keep from reaching for it.

Aunt Becky calls her for dinner. Hesitantly, she emerges from her cocoon of blankets. On her way out, she double checks her reflection in the mirror. She wipes the faint traces of blood from her face, forces herself to stand a little straighter.

. . .

2:13 AM.

She sobs into the Super Com, screaming for Mike. He answers in milliseconds, and he's crying, too. She can't breathe, she just holds her finger on the button, listening to his own sniffing. She trembles, holding her hand to her nose as she feels the familiar burst of warmth and wet on her upper lip. She feels it dripping from her ears, too. The steady stream traces a path along her jawline, staining the collar of her shirt.

It's the first time a *nightmare* has made her bleed.

She's afraid to wake her mother, afraid it will bring on another panic attack or something awful. There are just too many bad memories. Sobs wrack her body, and she can't think straight.

In and out. In . . . out . . .

"El? El, you still there?" Mike 's voice filters through the Super Com.

"Yes." She breathes, letting her forehead fall against the walkie talkie. It feels like he's in the room with her. Instinctively, she projects herself into his mind for an anchor.

"Nightmare." She tells him.

"I know." He tells her. "I'm coming over there."

"Mike." She says, softly. "Hurry."

It is mere minutes, she hears the sound of tires on snow. His headlights are off, and she watches from the window as he springs out of Nancy's car wearing a Superman t-shirt and sweatpants.

She takes the stairs with sock feet, silent, hurtling through the darkness.

They collide on the porch, sink to their knees.

"Bleeding." El warns, trying to keep from staining his shirt. The red

leaks from the spaces in between her fingers as she tries to staunch the flow.

"Don't worry about it." He says, shaking his head. So she lets her forehead fall against him. He holds her while she cries, and she can't breath or think or stop the shaking in her hands. When she's cried herself out, the bleeding has stopped. She wipes her face with her hand. He brushes the hair out of her eyes. El begins to hiccup uncontrollably, stinging eyes fixated on the snowy road.

"Want to talk about it?"

She shakes her head.

"Stay." She says.

"Let's go inside. You're going to freeze" He says, scooping her up. He carries her over the threshold, into the darkened house. They go into the kitchen, where he sets her down on the counter. Even in the dark, she can see the tears on his cheeks. She reaches up to brush them away, feeling that squirming guilt in the pit of her stomach.

She hates this. She hates that everything she feels has some effect on him. She keeps him up at night, she interrupts his sleep, she makes him feel sad or angry or scared even though the emotions don't belong to him. And he takes it, embraces it, because he knows it makes her feel better. She knows it's true, and nothing he can do or say will convince her otherwise.

He shoves a glass of water into her hand. She takes small sips, watching him in the dark. Mike never takes his eyes off her, and she can see his lip trembling. His nostrils flare, and suddenly she's afraid he's going to bolt or shatter into a million pieces in front of her.

Instead, he slams his fist into the countertop. The sound makes her jump about five feet in the air. She reaches out to grab his arm, feels him shaking under her hand. Three of his knuckles are split, and blood stains her fingers.

"Sorry." He mumbles, reaching for a paper towel.

"Don't." She says, taking it from his hand. She presses it onto the

wound. She feels all of the fight go out of him. She scoots off the counter to move closer to him. He sinks to his knees, bringing her down to the tiled floor with him. Tentatively, he takes the paper towel from her fingers and begins to clean her face, starting with her ears and working his way to her upper lip. His fingers caress her cheeks.

He breaks down then, and her eyes fill with tears at the sight of his face, at the pain written in it. They hold each other. They are bleeding noses and bleeding knuckles. They are not lost, though.

They are each other's anchor. They'll get through this.

...

She doesn't remember when her sobs finally subsided. She doesn't remember when he finally stopped shaking. She doesn't remember the exact point during the night when it started to get better. She remembers calming down enough to get words out, but there weren't really any words at all. Just the raw emotions clawing their way to the surface and the scent of him and the sound of his breathing.

Through the earliest hours of the morning, Mike sat with her on the cold tiled floor while his knuckles bled and the nightmare remained fresh in both of their minds.

...

Terry Ives makes her way down the carpeted stairs on silent feet. She wears two socks on each foot. Her feet get cold easily. Bad circulation. Her hair falls in lazy strands around her face, framing her sharp, lined features. She is young, even though you can't tell by looking at her. She was beautiful once.

Grey light filters through the windows in the living room.

Her frail hands hug the pale blue sweatshirt she wears closer to her body. On the landing, she gazes across the room.

She sees them sprawled on the floor. The Wheeler boy leans against the kitchen cabinets with his cheek resting against the top of her daughter's head. Jane, still so small and fragile at the age of sixteen,

nestled on the floor beside him.

She freezes.

What could've happened last night, while she slept? And why was the Wheeler boy there to comfort her daughter, when she could've easily been there to help?

She blinks, giving her head a small shake.

She knows, of course. She knows her daughter. She knows the Wheeler boy, and she knows what they are to each other.

She swallows, taking a last glance at the pair of them, folded on the tiles. Sleeping, pale-faced but seemingly peaceful.

She just wishes Jane would let her be, well, a mom. She supposes she lost the right to that title a long time ago.

5. Relapse

The nightmares come often, and they are brutal. Agonizing. She knows that the thing that is keeping Will under the weather is not a common cold.

Something is wrong. Of the Demogorgon variety.

She doesn't know what's going on, only that something is off. She can feel something in Will, she can see through the lies.

She goes to his house on Sunday morning. Alone. She doesn't bother knocking.

She finds Will sitting on the floor in his bedroom, sketching.

"Will." She growls, marching straight through the doorway. He gives a start when he sees her. She stops short when she sees his face, the withered, gaunt skin and sharp cheekbones. His skin is grey, his eyes dark and distant.

"Will?" She says, tentatively.

"Hey, El." He says, tiredly. He coughs, and it rattles his whole body.

"I . . . I just wanted to . . . um . . ." She stammers, hand reaching for the door knob. She blows air through her nostrils.

"Something is wrong with you." She says, roughly. Will swallows, averting his gaze.

"Something is wrong with you, Will. You don't have the flu. Alright? Don't try to lie. Friends don't lie." She says, pausing. Her eyes are fixated on him. "What's wrong?"

Will shakes his head.

"Nothing's wrong." He says. El bites her tongue, looking at him.

"Will . . ." She starts, glaring at him. Will springs to his feet, suddenly overcome with a coughing fit. He doubles over, eyes watering, hand

cupped to his mouth.

"Will?"

He pushes past her, barely making it to the bathroom before he slumps over the sink. Several slimy, greenish slugs fall out of his mouth and onto the white ceramic. His white-knuckled hands grip the sides of the sink with both hands as he dry heaves for a few moments. El watches, repulsed, as the living creatures make their way down the drain.

Finally, he resurfaces, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. He gives her a small look of reproach through watery eyes, swallowing hard.

"Will . . ."

"You can't tell my mom." He snaps. "Or Jonathan. Or Mike. Or anybody. Alright?"

"Will, I can't just-"

"El. You have to promise me. You can't tell anyone. I'm fine, I just . . . it happened a long time ago, when I first came out of the Upside Down. It happened for a couple months, and then it stopped. I went back to normal, everyone went back to normal. Well, last month, it happened again. These slugs, they come out of me. And it's like it was dormant for a while, and then something inside me just . . . woke up."

El searches his face, struggling to take it all in. She gazes at the slug's trail along the inside of the sink, the white tiles on the floor, the snow outside the single window in the bathroom.

"You can't expect me to keep this a secret."

"El. Please. You have to promise me, you won't tell anyone."

"What's happening to you?" She presses him, tears welling in her eyes.

"It's not as bad as it looks." He says, quickly, shifting his weight.

"Really? It looks pretty bad to me." Will falls silent for a moment,

staring at his bare feet.

"Can you feel it, El?" He says, suddenly, head snapping up.

"What?"

"The Upside Down." He says. "It's around us. I felt it when the slugs came back. Something's happening."

El's mind reels.

"You didn't open it, did you?" He says, with a ghost of a voice. She feels her breath catch in her throat. The Gate. He's talking about the Gate.

"No. No, I didn't." She says. Her hands start to tremble. She shoves them into her pockets.

"Is the Demogorgon back?" Will stares at her with wide eyes.

"No." She says, quickly. "No, Will. I don't think so. I think it would've already come for me if it was . . ." She thinks of the nightmares, the negative energy that is ever present.

"Will, listen." She says, placing a hand on his arm.

"I feel it. I really do. I feel the darkness and I feel what I felt during the Incident. And I . . . I've been having nightmares. More than usual." She tells him.

The Incident. It's what they'd been calling that week in November of '83. At least, in public. Will nods, eyes softening.

She swallows, continuing.

"And I think maybe Mike feels it too, because, you know, he can . . . um." She gives her head a little shake. "Nevermind. It's complicated."

Will gives her a hard look. He slumps against the sink. She watches his skin to turn a shade paler.

"You alright?" She says, reaching for him.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm okay." He says, waving her off. "What do we do?"

"I don't know." El whispers, squeezing her eyes shut. She pinches the bridge of her nose to relieve some of the pressure.

"I really think you should tell your mom." She says. "It's not fair to keep something like this from her. Maybe Hopper can help . . ."

"No." He snaps. "No, it has to be this way."

"Wil..."

"What about Mike? You said he can feel . . . things. What does he think?"

"I don't know what he feels." She says, quickly.

"He knows about the nightmares. I don't know if he can feel the . . . Upside Down . . . the way I, er, we can. And I don't want him to. He'll just do something stupid, trying to be the hero." She rolls her eyes.

"You're like . . . his queen. He thinks you're some damsel in distress, but you're not." Will says, laughing weakly. "Somebody needs to get it into his head that *you* should be the one protecting *him*. You're like . . . totally badass." He says.

"We protect each other." She says, suddenly defensive. Will forces another laugh.

"Okay. Well, you still haven't promised. This stays between us. We'll figure something out. Alright?" El takes a shuddering breath, closing her eyes. She collects her pieces, one by one. She pulls herself back together like a super-glued china doll.

"El?"

"Alright. I promise."

. . .

A day passes. Then another. Days stretch into long weeks that drag by, sluggish and uneventful. The nightmares are frequent. Will comes

to school, but he remains distant. His secret weighs on El's shoulders, searing hot guilt into her blood. She hates it, but she knows to break that promise now would be nothing short of catastrophic.

So she bites her tongue.

When Mike continues to question Will, she doesn't say anything. She acts just as ignorant as the rest of them.

Will evades their questions expertly, crafting together excuses that seem at least somewhat plausible. To Dustin and Lucas. Mike remains skeptical. El loves him for it, but it makes her feel worse.

She is burdened with the knowledge that Will is extremely sick. He's not getting better. He loses his appetite.

One time, at the Wheelers, she passes by the bathroom door. She can hear him puking in there, and wonders if he's coughing up another of those . . . slugs . . . or if he just can't keep anything down. When she asks him about it, in private, he admits to her worst suspicion. His stomach is too rocky to hold even the blandest food. He's thin and weak and a terrible cough plagues him. She wonders how on Earth he's managed to keep this from his family.

On top of everything that he's going through, she continues to feel the Upside Down, or at least, some essence of it. It's as if the shadows of that place are leaking into the Right Side Up. Though she can't distinguish any sort of gate or rift between the realms, even in the farthest reaches of her consciousness, she knows something isn't right. The thought keeps her up long into the early morning hours.

Mike is incessant, relentless. He's well aware that she's going through something, though doesn't know exactly what. The fact that he can't fix it drives him crazy. He is reluctant to leave her side, even when the bell rings for their next class or El's mom calls her home. The thoughts that exchange between their tangled minds become more frequent. He makes a habit of checking up on her. He's concerned, and he knows the nightmares are getting out of hand. When he walks her home, they remain on the porch, holding each other long after they arrive. Everything he does, everything he selflessly offers her, just makes it worse. She doesn't want to hurt him, so she finds herself

keeping her distance.

Maybe it's stupid. Maybe it's too late to save Mike. He's already fallen over the edge and he's fallen hard.

6. True North

El takes her bike from the garage, swinging her leg over the seat. As she sets off down the road, the cold wind ravages her face. Her eyes water as the frigid air stings her cheeks. Keeping the bike steady with a little help from her telekinesis, she reaches down to zip up Mike's old jacket. It's a soft, forest green and it keeps her warm.

It's the last week of January. The Snow Ball is five days away. She hasn't been thinking about it, with everything that's been going on. She allows herself a smile. Later today, Nancy is supposed to take her to the mall to pick out a dress.

She takes the corner fast, turning onto Mirkwood. At last, she pulls to a stop, deciding to lean her bike against a tree on the side of the road rather than try to cart it through all the snow. They'd gotten a lot of snowfall the past few days, despite it being sort of a warm winter. A warm winter for Hawkins, anyway.

She follows the slight decline, through the snowy trees and thick foliage. Her jeans are soaked in minutes. She curses herself for not putting on at least three pairs of socks. She hates it when her feet get cold.

El reaches the tall, chain link fence that once surrounded Hawkins National Laboratory. She shivers at the sight of the building, immediate panic climbing into her throat. She leans against a tree, forcing herself to breathe. She stands, gazing at the skeleton of what once was her prison.

The building is dark and deserted. The fence is rusted and falling apart in some places. Fading caution tape is strung hastily around the fence and the trees. A large sign reads DO NOT ENTER, GOVERNMENT PROPERTY in bold, red letters. After the Incident, and after Hopper blew the case open, people started getting upset. The truth about MK Ultra reached the public, and the state had no choice. They shut it down. Everything was swept under the rug as if it had never existed, to keep their image. To keep people quiet. Brenner is dead. His employees are safe and sound . . . in jail. And El is free.

She traces the sign with her finger, still fighting the onslaught of memories that threaten to consume her.

After a long time, she rouses herself, cutting a path through the thick snow drifts. She digs into the sweatshirt pocket for a compass, holding it in her palm. It's pointing true North, as it should be. She bites her tongue, giving the needle a little shove with her mind. It drifts a little to the side, now pointing North West. When she breaks her focus, it returns to normal.

She looks around at the empty buildings, wiping the familiar stream of blood from her upper lip.

She circles the entire perimeter, then stops back at the sign, thinking hard. There's no gate anymore. At least, not here. From where she stands, the whole facility seems quiet and free of abnormality.

Tentatively, she pushes on the fence. She begins to explore along the length of it, testing it for weakness. She finds a place where the links in the fence have become loose, detached from the frame. She's able to use her powers to widen the space, creating an opening big enough for her to fit through.

El creeps forward tentatively, forcing herself to take deep breaths. She makes it across the expanse of snow and trees until she reaches one of the buildings. One of the windows is cracked, another completely boarded up. There are no footprints to be seen, aside from her own. It's a good sign.

She continues to watch the compass, but it remains directing her towards true North. She skirts the outsides of the buildings, eyeing the boarded windows and chipped paint. El stops outside one of the buildings, taking a seat on cement wall.

There, she closes her eyes, feeling her way around the place mentally. She can hear her own heartbeat. She feels the negative energy that's been draped around her body like a fog, but it is no stronger here than it is back in her own neighborhood, her own house. For once, nothing is out of place here. El resurfaces from the mental venture with a sharp intake of breath, suddenly exhausted. She digs an energy bar out of her pocket, and she takes a bite, glancing nervously

around.

El shouldn't be here. She *hates* being here, in the birthplace of her nightmares. But she had to be sure. She had to see for herself. The Gate is no longer open. She sealed the rift a long time ago.

A thousand questions chase each other around her head. The Gate is sealed, so what exactly is causing the sudden onslaught of nightmares? What awakened the strange pestilence that torments Will, four years after his return from the Upside Down? Something is out of place. Something simply is not right.

El gets to her feet, heading towards the hole in the fence. Nancy is supposed to pick her up at four. She glances at the cloudy sky, suddenly wishing she had a watch. During the trek back to her bike, she continues to nibble at the energy bar.

She rides home, chewing the inside of her cheek. Her thoughts drift to Mike and the Snow Ball, allowing herself a little excitement. It will be their first time actually attending the dance, despite his invitation four years previously.

She arrives home, soaked to the skin, cheeks and nose stained pink from the cold. She stops in the entryway, shaking the snow from her hood and boots. She makes her way to the kitchen.

"Hey, kiddo." Aunt Becky greets her. The young woman sits on the counter. She sips Diet Coke out of a can, a cigarette held loosely between her slender fingers. El shoots her a smile.

"Hey, Beck." She says, cheerfully.

Becky reaches out and tousels El's hair.

"You're soaked." She says, tugging on El's sleeve. El shrugs her off.

"Snowball fight." She lies. Becky bobs her head, taking another drag on the cigarette.

"Sounds fun. You should go change, though. You don't wanna catch a cold." El gives her a nod, then makes her way up to her room. She closes the door gently, leaning against it. She takes a minute to catch

her breath, head still spinning from her useless venture to the lab. El tries to push the thoughts from her mind. Now is not the time. Now is the time for ball gowns and school dances and spending time with Nancy.

She pulls on a pair of jeans and a Captain America t-shirt, tying her still-damp hair back from her face in a tight ponytail. She rummages around inside her drawers until she finds her wallet, the one Joyce gave her for Christmas one year.

El glances at the clock on her bedside table. It reads 3:43. Seventeen minutes. On her way out, she freezes at her reflection in the mirror. The shadows under her eyes are too prominent. She bites her lip, thinking. In the tiny bathroom across the hall, she finds her old makeup kit. It's the kind of stuff meant for playing dress up, with small bottles of purple lip gloss and brilliant blue eyeshadow, but it'll do. She smears some of the cover-up stuff under her eyes, rubbing it in. It's not much better, but it helps a little.

El doesn't wear makeup. Ever. She hates the *fakeness* of it. Mike insists she doesn't need it, and that's good enough for her. But right now, it's necessary. She needs to divert suspicion, especially from Nancy, who notices everything.

She races back down the stairs, skidding to a halt when she gets to the door that separates the kitchen from the living room, where Becky is now watching TV. In the kitchen, she busies herself making a sandwich. She wolfs it down with a couple minutes to spare.

Nancy knocks on the front door. She bids her aunt a quick goodbye and answers it, joining Nancy on the porch. The older girl pulls her into a hug.

"I'm so excited!" Nancy says, grinning. "We haven't gone shopping together in, like, forever." El returns her smile. Nancy is like a sister to her. Plus, after spending so much time with a bunch of teenage boys, it's a nice change.

"How is school going?" El asks her as they make their way down the steps, towards her car.

"Oh, it's good. Really good. College is fun. There's a lot of cute boys." Nancy says, wiggling her eyebrows. El giggles.

"And yet, the one you agree to go out with is right here in Hawkins." El says. Nancy gives her shoulder a playful shove. El climbs into the passenger seat. Nancy starts the car.

"That reminds me, I was gonna ask you, when are you and Mike getting married?" She says. El opens her mouth, closes it again, eyes wide.

"What?"

"Oh, come on, El. Everyone in Hawkins knows you guys are totally gonna get married one day. Jonathan and I have a bet going. He thinks Mike's going to propose. I think you'll end up doing it because Mike will be too scared to ask you." She says, giggling. El tries to suppress her laughter.

"Nancy, we're sixteen."

"I know, I know. It'll happen. . . eventually." She says, still chuckling to herself.

"I'm gonna have to side with Jonathan, though." El says, smiling. "Mike asked me to the Snow Ball."

"Right, right." Nancy shakes her head. "I still can't believe my brother has a *girlfriend*."

El doesn't say anything, still grinning widely. She reaches over and turns the radio on. "I Melt With You" blasts through the speakers.

First, they go to a fancy store that Nancy swears by. The place has rows upon rows of dresses. She and Nancy peruse the racks, and her fingers brush tentatively along the various silks and cottons. Some are embellished with jewels, some are long and flowing, others are strapless and close-fitting.

For a moment, she forgets about Will and the Upside Down and everything going on, so enthralled with the beautiful gowns. Nancy smiles, watching the younger girl as she gapes at the dresses.

"Do you want to try some on?" Nancy offers. El just nods, smiling widely.

Soon, her arms are laden with colorful dresses. She rushes into the dressing room, pushing the initial panic away. She forces herself to ignore the fact that it's a cramped, semi-dark space. She steels herself, takes a deep breath.

She tries the first one on, a tight, bright red dress. El immediately decides she doesn't like the way it fits and peels it off, taking another one off of its hanger.

"El, you alright?" Nancy's voice reaches her, muffled through the door.

"Yes." She starts to try on a pink, frilly thing. It's itchy. She takes it off.

The third one, however, takes her breath away. It's long, the hem brushes the tops of her feet. The dress is pale blue, with a thick silver waistband and straps. She turns around, staring at herself in the mirror. She unlocks the door, standing with her arms away from her sides for Nancy's inspection.

The older girl's face lights up, and she reaches out to fix one of the straps.

"Gorgeous." She says, giving El a thumbs up.

"Isn't it?" El says, smoothing out the soft fabric beneath her fingers.

"Is it the one you want?" Nancy asks her.

"Yes."

When the dress is paid for, she spends at least two hours hunting for shoes until Nancy uses her Super Woman skills to find a pair of silver wedges that go with the dress perfectly.

"I'm starving." El says, massaging her grumbling stomach. They stop at the pretzel stand on the corner, and El buys herself a gigantic raspberry slushie that turns her teeth blue. They sit at a table in the

center of the mall, eating their pretzels.

"When is the dance?"

"Friday night." El tells her.

"Oh, good. I don't go back to school until Saturday morning. I'll get to take some pictures of you guys." El smiles at her.

"That would be great."

They finish their pretzels, chatting excitedly about the dance. El leans back in her chair, eyes drifting lazily around the place. She watches the passerby absentmindedly. She thinks of the dress, and tries to imagine what Mike's face will look like when he sees it. Thoughts of Will, and the nightmares, are far away.

For the moment, she feels like a normal kid. A normal sixteen year old, who's biggest concern in the rapidly approaching dance. For the moment, she is happy. For the moment, that's all that matters.

. . .

Nancy pulls up in front of El's house. El gives her a quick hug and gets out of the car, taking the porch steps two at a time. Nancy starts the engine, returning home in a matter of minutes.

She finds Mike asleep on the couch in the living room, buried under a pile of blankets. She plops herself down next to him, kicking off her shoes. She flicks through the channels, eyes drifting toward her sixteen year old brother's sleeping form. She can hear him mumbling in his sleep. He tosses, becoming more entangled in the blankets. He kicks her painfully in the leg.

"Ow, Mike!" She growls, shoving his foot.

"What?" He grumbles sleepily, sitting up. He squints at her.

"Where were you all day?" He asks, yawning. Nancy chuckles.

"I was with El. We were dress shopping for the Snow Ball." She tells him, prodding his shoulder. His eyes widen, and a sleepy smile creeps

onto his face.

"How did it go?"

"Good." Nancy says, returning her attention to the television set. "She seems really excited about it." She gives her brother a pointed look.

"Did you get a tux yet?"

Mike frowns.

"No."

"Well, you should."

"Aren't they, like, super expensive?"

Nancy shrugs. Mike leans back without another word, returning to his nest of blankets.

"And the beast returns to hibernation." She teases him, rolling her eyes.

"Shuddup."

7. Paper Snowflakes

El doesn't get a chance go out looking for the Gate again, though her mind continues to run through possibilities. She's highly skeptical, though. If the Gate had opened, she would've felt it. She thinks of the normal compass, and Mike's explanation of the "Flea and the Acrobat" theory so many years ago. She's almost positive there's no rift, no gate to speak of.

She and Mike walk to school like they normally do, hand and hand. She's relieved when Will shows up, looking pale and thin but at least a little bit cheerful. She hears Mike's sigh of relief and knows he's thinking along the same lines.

. . .

"What?" Mike has the phone sandwiched between his ear and the crook of his shoulder as he washes the dishes. Holly stands dutifully beside her older brother, putting whatever plates and silverware he hands her into the dishwasher. El sits cross legged on their countertop, eating Cheetos. It's Wednesday afternoon.

"I don't want to, Lucas." He says, rolling his eyes. She laughs.

"Well, why'd Dustin even agree to that?" El is only half-listening to what he's saying, keeping her attention on Holly. The seven-year-old drops the plate that Mike tries to hand her and it crashes to the floor. Or, at least, it should have. Instead, it stays suspended in the air, inches from the floor. El makes the plate move through the air, and it lands gently in the dishwasher. Holly claps her hands and giggles. Mike shakes his head, giving El a pointed look.

She waits for the nosebleed, but it never comes.

"I'm going to kick his ass." Mike says, returning to his conversation. She can't distinguish what Lucas is saying, only that he seems pretty ruffled.

"Alright, alright. Fine. I'll help." Mike rolls his eyes again, handing a handful of forks and spoons to his little sister. El scoots off the

counter and helps her sort them out.

"I'll ask her." He hangs up the phone, running a hand through his hair. El raises her eyebrows.

"Dustin signed us up to help set up the gym for the dance." He tells her, shaking his head. "I have no idea why. We're supposed to do it after school tomorrow. You wanna come?" He says.

"Yeah." She says. He turns the water off and starts the dishwasher.

"Alright Holly, you can go now." He says.

"Dress up?" She asks, tugging on his sleeve.

"No, I don't wanna play dress up." Mike responds, pinching the bridge of his nose. He takes breath.

"Please? You never play dress up!" She pouts, her bottom lip sticking out. He glances at El, then back at her.

"Fine. We'll play dress up. Only for a couple minutes, alright?" The seven-year old hops up and down excitedly. She grabs both their hands and tugs them up the stairs.

Soon, she has both Mike and El sitting cross legged on the floor. She gets them to put on princess dresses and wrestles them into multiple hats and scarves. Mike grumbles incessantly, but lets her plaster a ridiculous amount of makeup onto his face. El cracks up, full-out laughing at him for several minutes until he grabs the lipstick from Holly's hand and smears it across her cheeks. It just makes her laugh even harder.

Holly, dressed as Sleeping Beauty, waves a plastic princess scepter around and steps back to admire her work.

"Holly?" Karen Wheeler appears in the doorway, mouth slightly agape as she takes in the mess of discarded clothes on the floor and Mike and El's makeup smeared faces.

"What in the world . . .?" She blinks in surprise, a ghost of a smile playing on her lips.

"We're playing dress up." Mike explains, managing to keep a straight face. Karen chuckles.

"I see. Well, clean up when you're done." She says. "And don't get makeup on the carpet!" She calls over her shoulder as she makes her way down the stairs.

They do as she says, and El helps Mike stuff all the princess dresses into a bin in Holly's room. They wipe their faces off in the bathroom.

Holly tugs on his sleeve impatiently.

"Play more. Play more. Can we do Star Wars?" She says, eyes wide. El gives him a gentle nudge, and he gives Holly an exasperated sigh.

"I guess."

Mike takes his Star Wars action figures from a shelf in his bedroom and starts lining them up along her little desk. She starts to play with them, sorting them out and making moving them as if they're fighting each other. After a few moments, she brandishes a figurine in Mike's direction.

"Story." She commands, glaring at him. "Do the voices."

Mike sighs and takes the Luke Skywalker figure from her little fingers. El picks up a dinosaur toy and joins in. Mike glances from Holly to El and back again, smiling. He begins to expertly craft a tale, imitating a unique voice for each figurine. His story entertains them until Mike's mom calls them downstairs for dinner.

...

Mike finds himself performing a very dangerous balancing act on the school's only ladder. It's rickety and old, probably missing a couple screws. Dustin hands him long strips of silver tinsel, which he pins on the gym wall with thumbtacks. He reaches over to pin the next piece up, gritting his teeth as the damn ladder sways precariously.

El sits at a foldable table in the center of the gym, helping sort through box upon box of decorations. Lucas sits with her. They find all the winter-related stuff, cut-outs of big evergreen trees and a fake

snow machine and all sorts of lights, and separate it into a big pile.

Around the gym, parents and students who signed up to help are rushing around. Soon, Mike and Dustin join them, dropping into plastic chairs on either side of El and Lucas. Mike lets out a long sigh, wiping the sweat off his brow.

"Oh my God, I almost died." He says, blinking. El looks up at him, raising an eyebrow. Dustin snickers.

"Nah, man. Worst case scenario, broken bones."

"Not helping, Dustin." Mike groans.

One of the adult volunteers brings them a pile of white construction paper and some scissors and asks them to make paper snowflakes.

"Paper snowflakes?" El asks, looking perplexed. Mike chuckles. He'd forgotten for a moment that there are things she still doesn't know.

"Oh, yeah. Paper snowflakes. Here, I'll show you." He takes the paper from her hands and shows her how to cut the little triangles and designs into it. When he's finished, he opens it up to reveal the final product. El's eyes widen.

"Woah."

"I know. They're kinda cool." He says, handing her another piece of paper. He watches her as she starts making the snowflakes, each design becoming increasingly elaborate. He feels a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, looking at the way she sticks her tongue between her teeth as she make the intricate cuts, the slight crease in her brow. Mike decides that maybe this wasn't such a bad idea after all.

Soon, they are surrounded by paper clippings and hundreds of the snowflakes. Mike reaches across the table to brush some paper from her hair, giving her a quick kiss. Dustin rolls his eyes.

"Jesus, guys. No P.D.A. allowed." Mike makes a rude gesture with his finger, one Dustin gladly returns. Lucas laughs.

"Yeah, save it for the dance."

After a few more minutes, Dustin tosses his scissors onto the table.

"Oh my God, this is taking *forever*." He groans, dramatically. Mike rolls his eyes.

"This was *your* idea."

"Uh, no. My mom made me do it." He corrects them.

"And then you decided to torture us, too?" Lucas says, exasperated.

"Yeah." Dustin grins sheepishly. Mike flicks a paper clipping at him. El laughs.

Eventually they are told that they've made enough paper snowflakes. Somebody splits them into pairs. Mike and El help set up chairs around the circular tables that have been pushed to the sides of a larger, empty space for the dance floor. Mike drops a chair on his foot and swears loudly. The adults near them shoot him dirty looks. El can barely hold in her laughter.

There are a lot of chairs. Almost a hundred, and by the time they are finished, both of them are exhausted and disgruntled. Lucas and Dustin aren't in better spirits.

"I can't believe you dragged me into that." Lucas says.

"It wasn't my fault." Dustin snaps. The two continue to argue the entire way home. Mike shakes his head in obvious irritation, reaching to take El's hand. Her fingers fit into his instinctively, and she closes her eyes. She can feel his exhaustion, his annoyance a thousand times amplified.

This link, this connection on such an abstract level, is nothing short of exhilarating. But it's nothing new. Not to them, anyway. He embraces her outreach, finds solace in the entanglement.

Eventually, Dustin breaks away and so does Lucas, still bickering as they go their separate ways. The two of them are left to themselves, quiet for a while. Mike pulls her by the hand through his front door,

down the basement steps and into his arms.

. . .

El can barely sit still all through her classes, glancing at the clock every few minutes. Today is Friday. Tonight is the Snowball. She can't focus on her work, doesn't even try to. At lunch, Mike is happier than she's seen him in a while.

Dustin complains loudly about that fact that he's too nervous to eat anything, though El swears he goes through four cups of chocolate pudding. *At least.* Every few minutes, he turns around in his seat to glance at Max, his date to the dance. Lucas slaps his arm.

"Dude, that's creepy."

"What's creepy?" Dustin says, still gazing at the pretty red-head across the cafeteria. She catches his eye and smiles, giving him a little wave. Dustin waves back, blushing profusely.

"You're sitting there gawking at her. Show a little class, man."

"Oh my God, you're right." Dustin says, turning back around. El giggles. Mike rolls his eyes, sighing exasperatedly.

"Lucas, did you even ask anyone yet?"

Lucas shakes his head.

"No. Will and I are going stag. Right?" Will nods, forcing a smile.

"Who's driving?"

"Uh, I am, *obviously.*" Dustin says.

"You can pick us up at my house, okay?" Mike says, prodding at his shoulder. He gestures to El. Dustin nods.

"Okay. What about food?"

"What about food?"

"Dude, we should totally get dinner before."

"Pizza?" El suggests.

"Yes, I second that." Dustin says, quickly. Lucas and Will nod.

"Okay. I'll be at your house by five, Mike. Then pizza."

El looks around at them, her boys, and her face splits into a wide smile. This feels *right*.

. . .

"Hold still." El sits on the counter in the bathroom, her hair pinned up on top of her head in painfully tight rollers. Her mother stands in front of her, holding an eyeliner pencil with trembling fingers.

"Ow." El cries, hands flying to her face as her mom accidentally pokes her in the eye with it.

"Oh, honey. I'm sorry." Her mother says. El lets out a breathy laugh, turning to inspect her eye in the big mirror behind her.

"What's going on here?" El turns, quickly. Her Aunt Becky stands in the doorway, hands on her hips. Smoke curls gracefully from the cigarette between her teeth.

"I got a job, working as a clown for some kid's birthday party." El says, with the level of sarcasm that would've made Mike proud. She strikes a ridiculous pose. Becky laughs, eyes roving over the smudges of mascara all over her face, the smeared lipstick.

"Ter, why don't you let me take over?" El's mother shoves the eyeliner into her sister's hand.

"Please." Terry says, smiling. Becky dampens a cloth in the sink and El uses it to clean her face.

"Alright, fresh canvas." Becky says, licking her lips. She puts out her cigarette, going to work on El's face. She starts with her eyes, rubbing the concealer over the dark shadows, giving her a dusting of eyeshadow and then eyeliner. She draws it on with steady hands, thick and black and beautiful. Mascara darkens El's lashes, creating a shocking frame for her big, dark brown irises. She tries not to blink.

El watches her in the mirror, holding her breath. She is reminded of another time, another pair of hands. It felt strange, then, when Mike put the powder on her cheeks and rubbed the sweet-smelling gloss over her lips. But after, she was *pretty*. Pretty good.

Becky moves to her cheeks, coloring them in with blush, highlighting every feature. When Becky is finished, she stands back and wolf-whistles. El gives her aunt a playful shove.

"Damn. Wait till Prince Charming sees you. He's going to *die*." Becky pulls her niece into a hug.

El goes to her room, pulling on her dress. Her fingers move over the soft, silky fabric, smoothing it out. One by one, she unravels the rollers. Her hair falls around her face in tight ringlets. In front of the mirror, she freezes, staring at herself. Not in vain.

El is many things, but she is not conceited. Instead, she stares right *through* herself. She looks for any broken pieces, any sharp edges. Anything reminiscent of Experiment 011. Any reminder of the feeble little girl that escaped from Hawkins National Laboratory four years ago.

She is completely whole. If only that bastard, Dr. Brenner, could see her now.

8. Slugs and Snow Balls

Becky drives her over to the Wheeler's. She gets out of the car, thankful that the snow is lesser here and she can make it to the front door without getting her new shoes soaking wet. Nancy answers the door. The older girl lets out a squeal, ushering her inside and out of the cold.

"Oh my God, you look so *gorgeous*." El gives her a wide smile.

"Thank you." She says, somewhat abashedly. Her stomach twists itself into a knot.

"Mike's upstairs." Nancy says. Jonathan appears at her shoulder, camera slung around his arm. He smiles, pulling El into a hug. She returns it gladly.

"Nancy asked me to come over and take pictures . . ." He grins sheepishly. "I think Will's upstairs with Mike. Lucas should be here any minute."

She hears a few heavy footsteps, and her head snaps to the staircase. Mike stands on the landing, hands on the railing. He blinks a couple times, looking her up and down. He opens his mouth and closes it again. He's blushing, and searching for words. El fights the strange urge to laugh.

He's dressed in black pants and shoes, a button-down blue shirt and a black vest. An untied, black tie hangs loosely around his neck. He's brushed his hair in attempt to tame his mess of dark curls, but to no avail.

"You look . . . good." He finally gets out, voice unusually high. He takes the last few steps.

"Really good." He says again, still blinking. He's grinning, a looking a sort of dazed. Like someone hit him over the head and he still hasn't quite recovered. He finds it hard to breathe. El closes the space between them, standing on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. . Jonathan snaps a picture and both spring back, blinking in surprise. Nancy

smirks.

"You look *handsome*." She says, reaching around his neck to tie his tie. She struggles with it for a few moments, becoming increasingly frustrated, before Nancy steps in to help.

"Alright, lovebirds. Stand over there." Nancy points to the doorway. And so begins their photoshoot of sorts. Jonathan has them stand at various places around the house, snapping pictures. Eventually, he persuades them to stand out in the snow for a wintery picture. Though the sky is darkening, Jonathan insists the pictures will turn out wonderfully.

A light snow begins to fall, and Mike tentatively brushes the snowflakes off of El's bare shoulders, ushering her back inside. He doesn't take his eyes off her.

Will makes his way down the stairs, dressed in a tuxedo and looking a little pale but jovial. El feels a twinge of concern, and a little guilt for not worrying about him as much as she probably should be. The dance has been distracting, and Will is good at hiding things.

El pushes the thought away, though, wanting to enjoy this night more than anything else. She makes herself a promise: She'll savor it. She'll remember it.

Someone rings the doorbell, and El reaches to answer it. Lucas stands on the porch with his hands shoved in his pockets. He's dressed in a button-down and black pants, grinning cheekily. He wiggles his eyebrows, pulling El into a good-natured hug.

"Jesus, you're giving Mike a run for his money." He says, smirking. Mike clears his throat, loudly.

"Yeah. She nearly gave me a heart attack." Mike says, nodding. He grins, wrapping an arm around her. He gives her shoulders a reassuring squeeze.

They hear the scrape of car tires, and Dustin bursts through the door.

"Ready for the best night of our lives?" He yells, making everyone jump. Max, his date, trails closely behind him. She's wearing a gold

dress. Her long, red hair falls down her back in waves, reaching down to the small of her back.

El doesn't know Max very well. She's a Junior, like the boys, and she seems friendly enough. She's in El's chemistry class.

Max gives them all a warm smile. El smiles back.

Jonathan springs into action, taking yet another round of pictures. He has Dustin and Max stand together. Dustin is blushing. He looks shell-shocked, like he can't imagine how in the world he managed to score such a date. Max, on the other hand, looks rather comfortable, slinging her arm around his neck. El can barely contain her laughter at the duo.

Jonathan eventually gets all the boys together to take a picture. They put their arms around each other a little awkwardly, grinning as the camera flashes. Jonathan steps back, letting out a long sigh. Nancy grabs his hand.

"Okay, we'll let you guys go." Nancy gives El a quick hug, then prods Mike on the shoulder.

"Watch yourself, Michael. Don't do anything stupid." Mike raises his hands defensively. Nancy's expressions softens. "Have fun." She marches down the hallway, pulling Jonathan by the hand, and the pair disappear into the kitchen.

"Pizza?" Dustin says, loudly. He glances at Max, smiling broadly. "Do you like pizza?"

Max nods.

"Of course."

Dustin takes him a moment to find his keys. He holds out his arm. Max takes it, and he leads the way out onto the Wheeler's front steps and into the gentle snowfall.

...

They all manage to squeeze into his car, with El and Mike stuffed into

the very back. Mike attempts to arrange his long legs in a way that is comfortable, and fails miserably. El keeps her hand clasped around his, giving in to her excitement. They pull out of the driveway, taking off down the road.

Mike rubs her knuckles with his thumb in repeated, circular motions. He grins broadly.

"Finally." He says, resting his forehead against her own. She nods, closing her eyes, breathing him in.

"Finally."

. . .

They sit at a table in the corner, by a big window. El picks at her salad, only half-listening to Lucas and Dustin as they argue over which Star Wars movie was the best, something they'd fought over a thousand times before. Will, bored with the whole thing, doodles on the corner of his napkin. Mike excuses himself to the bathroom. El gets to her feet, making toward the soda fountain for a refill. Max jumps to her feet.

"I'll come with you."

El gives her a small smile.

"You're Eleanor, right?" Max says. El nods.

"Just call me El."

Max smiles.

"Is Mike your boyfriend?" She asks the question casually, sweeping a long lock of hair out of her face.

"Yes."

Max nods.

"I thought so. I've seen you guys together at school a lot. How long have you been together?"

El has to think for a moment, because there is a point where one life ends and an entirely new one begins. And Mike is her constant, the difference between Experiment 011 and El. He's more than that . . . word.

"Three years." She tells the redhead, pouring Diet Coke into a cup.

"That's a long time." Max says, raising her eyebrows.

"I guess." She says.

"And you know Dustin, too?"

"Yeah, we've been friends since, er, seventh grade." El says, biting her lip.

"Well, I think he's *adorable*." She says, winking. El grins, happy for Dustin. They make their way back to the table. El drops into the seat next to Mike, smiling.

"Oh man, I hope there's pudding." Dustin groans.

"You just ate, like, ten pieces of pizza." Lucas reminds him.

"Oh yeah."

Max giggles. Mike checks his watch.

"We'd better go." He tells Dustin. They leave, piling back into Dustin's car. They arrive at the school in a matter of minutes. The front of the gym is all lit up. Mike grabs El's hand, pulling her through the double doors. Her breath catches in her throat.

She gazes at the lights and the silver tinsel draped over the walls. The goddamn paper snowflakes. El, drowning in the euphoria, clings to Mike's arm. All around them, people are chatting and laughing. The gym floor is a writhing mass of dancing bodies, and the music is loud. It resonates in El's very bones, throbbing with every beat of her heart.

Mike looks around at his peers. He spots Troy in the crowd, and some other mouth breathing blockheads: bullies who used to make their lives hell, whose names he can no longer remember. He almost

laughs out loud. He used to be so afraid of them. Now, they are nothing.

Troy catches his eye and immediately averts his eyes, slinking away. He wouldn't dare come within ten feet of El. Mike laughs, gazing at her, at loss as to what in the world he did to deserve her.

They stand together, taking it all in. He presses his lips to her forehead briefly, and she can feel his smile.

"Remember when I asked you, the first time?"

She nods, not saying anything.

"Well, c'mon then."

And they're dancing. El will hold on to the memory for the rest of her life. She will remember the freckles on Mike's cheeks and the silvery lights above their heads and the feeling of his strong, steady arms around her. The energy in the room is infectious.

Eventually, they wear themselves out, making their way over to a table laden with snacks and soda cans. He hands one to El, breaking the seal. She giggles as it fizzes and pops, spilling all over the floor.

"Woah . . ." He says, holding the can at arm's length to avoid spilling all over himself. He manages to avoid most of the damage.

El hands him a napkin, still laughing as he attempts to clean himself up. Around them, people are talking and laughing. She catches a gaggle of girls staring at him. One of them bats her eyelashes, arranging herself in a blatantly provocative fashion. El feels her cheeks heating up.

She's not an idiot. She knows about the girls that ogle at Mike in the halls. She's very aware that he is six-foot-three, that his mop of dark hair and the constellations of freckles on his cheeks draw attention. Puberty hit him hard, and people *notice*.

But Michael Wheeler has eyes for one person. He fell in love with her in the November of 1983. He's never stopped loving her.

Dustin and Max join them, red faced and laughing. Dustin looks somewhat breathless, a little dazed. Lucas and Will find their way to the snack table, grinning.

"Dude, this is pretty cool." Will tells Mike.

"Worth the couple hours of our lives we wasted on Thursday?"

"I don't know about that . . ." Lucas shoots Dustin a pointed look. Mike gives his friend a shove.

"Give him a break. It wasn't *that* bad."

El pats Dustin on the shoulder.

"No, it wasn't. Kinda fun, actually."

A group of older kids push past them, laughing. They stop, gazing at Will, then Lucas, and the other two couples.

"Look at this." A taller boy says, wolf-whistling. His face twists into a smirk. "Faggots." He spits the word in Will's face, pushing past them. He knocks his shoulder into Will as they pass. Will grimaces, biting his lip. El feels her cheeks redden, and anger boils to the surface. She steps forward, but Will catches her wrist.

"Don't." He says, shaking his head. "It's not worth it."

Lucas is cracking his knuckles, his lip curling. Mike shakes his head, eyebrows knit.

"Assholes."

The boys aren't surprised when the kid who knocked into Will suddenly trips and falls on his face. Mike and Dustin exchange glances, then look at El. Lucas wordlessly hands her a napkin from the snack table.

Max, seemingly oblivious until now, points at El's face.

"Oh my god, your nose is bleeding."

El nods, mopping her face.

"I know. It... happens sometimes." She says, shrugging.

The music changes, slowing down. Mike searches her face.

"You alright?" She nods. A smile spreads across her face.

"You wanna dance?" She says. He nods, grinning and offering her his hand. He tugs her forward, onto the floor. They stand at the edge, avoiding the crowded center of the gym. Mike takes a breath, grabbing her hands.

"Okay, just put one of your hands . . . here. And another, right here." Tentatively, he places a hand on her hip, and they begin to sway. It isn't hard, and there aren't any real steps. He's looking at their feet, blushing a bit. She guesses he's really focused on trying not to step on her feet.

His hair falls into her face, and she reaches up to brush it away. Finally, he meets her eyes. And then they're kissing. It's so different from that time in the cafeteria, when she barely knew the meaning of friendship, let alone love. Four years later, after a lifetime of depravity from any human closeness, he has taught her the meaning of love. She is certain she loves him. Certain that he saved her, in all the ways a person can be saved. Certain he loves her, too.

The Snow Ball isn't exactly as she'd imagined it. It's really just a dance, despite the significance it's held in her mind. And all that matters is . . . him. His steadiness, his wholeness. Each exhalation stirs the stray hairs that fall around her face.

He pulls her off to the side, and they weave their way through the tables and chairs, hurrying through a separate set of doors.

They're in a deserted hallway, the one that leads to the cafeteria. His hands are splayed on either side of her head, against the wall, and he's kissing her and she's kissing him back. It's so different from when they were younger, twelve and thirteen . . . It's better, sometimes sloppy, but it makes her feel *good*. And it fills her with a kind of hunger. A feeling that is new and exhilarating. She welcomes it,

though, lets it overwhelm her for a moment. His breath brushes across her face, his familiar scent lingers on her skin.

There's a cough. A small cough, coming from down the hall. Mike doesn't hear it, too preoccupied with her, but she does and she puts a hand on his chest. He pulls away, blinking at her. She turns to look over his shoulder.

"Will?" Mike turns around, and the boy across the hall stops in his tracks. He opens his mouth, about to say something. A terrible cough racks his body, and he brings his hand to his mouth, doubling over. El steps toward him. When, again, he straightens up, a large slug writhes in his open palm. And he begins to tremble.

9. Sirens

Will stumbles forward. One step, then two. His skin pales, turning a ghostly white, then almost gray. She squints at him, because the shadows under his eyes are suddenly darker than before and his skin has an oddly shiny quality. Another fit of coughs consumes him for a moment. His fist clenches, white-knuckled, around the slug as two more tumble from his mouth, landing with sickening *thuds* on the tiled floor.

He sways on the spot, blinking too much. El feels as if she's moving in slow motion. She moves forward, and she feels her lips moving but she can't hear her own voice. Everything is crashing down around them in that narrow hallway. Everything is falling apart.

Will's eyes roll into the back of his head, and he crashes to the ground. His body writhes, arms and legs flailing wildly, fingernails clawing erratically at thin air. Terrible sounds escape his lips. Twisted moans and guttural cries, like those of a wounded animal. He continues to claw and scratch, scraping his own skin in the process.

El breaks from her reverie, and she rushes down the hall. She skids to a halt, crashing to her knees beside Will. Mike appears at her side in seconds, kneeling down.

"Will?"

"Will!"

Mike is yelling, hands gripping his friend's shoulder. Will's hand swings and out and catches Mike across the face. Mike springs back in surprise. El tries to rouse Will with no success. She hears the door click and turns to look over her shoulder. One of the chaperones, a middle aged woman with dark hair and glasses stands in front of the door. She looks frightened.

"What's going on?" She calls, stepping toward them.

"Call the police." Mike says, his voice unsteady. El feels the overwhelming terror in him. Panic surrounds their entangled minds.

They breathe as one body and mind, consumed with fear for their friend. Fear and guilt.

Will has been hiding things for far too long.

"What?" The woman says, looking aghast. She attempts to peer around Mike and El's bodies, trying to glance at Will's writhing form.

"Call the police, get an ambulance. Now!" Mike's yelling now.

The woman dawdles for a moment, unsure, then disappears through those double doors.

"Will?"

"Will!" Mike creeps closer, gazing at Will. The teenager's skin is gray. His eyes are open but unfocused. He continues to moan, making those awful animal noises.

"Will, can you hear me?"

No response, only the unnatural wailing. He tosses and turns on the floor, gazing at something unseen to both of them.

All the fight goes out of El, very suddenly. She falls, palms against the floor. She presses a hand over her eyes, attempting to ward off the throbbing in her head. She can't catch her breath, and black spots swim in her line of vision. She shakes her head, fighting the darkness. Fighting the nightmare, the flashback. She can smell Papa's cologne. She can feel the weight of the helmet and the gentle lapping of saltwater from the bath. Darkness presses on her eyelids. Her heart skips a beat, because she feels *it*. The Demogorgon.

Clawing its way into her conscious, overwhelming her senses. Like before.

Mike grips her by the wrists. His thumbs press into the place where her pulse fumbles just underneath the skin. He holds fast.

"El." He says her name, extending his grasp mentally. He reacts to him, she latches on. Her eyelids flutter.

"El. Listen to me. Are you listening to me?" She gazes at him, but Will's moaning is equivalent to physical pain and there's a weight on her chest she cannot rid herself of.

Bad. Bad men. Bad monsters. Bad memories.

The floodgates are open.

He squeezes her wrists harder, the pain and the mental link helping to center her, to bring her back to the present.

"El, can you hear me?"

"Yes." She gasps, tears in her eyes. His face swims into complete focus. There are three thin, bloody scratches running the length of his face where Will's fingernails caught him. The blood drips into his right eye.

"Listen to me. I can't lose you. Not here. Not now." He gives her a little shake. "I need you . . . I need you to stay with me, okay? I need you to help me help Will." He speaks, softly, forcing her to meet his eyes. "You're here with me. The bad men can't hurt you. Do you trust me, El? Are you listening?"

She nods. Her voice is a ghost, a single breath in the void.

"I trust you."

"Stay with me."

She nods again, fighting the onslaught of memories that threaten to eat her alive. She can see Mike gritting his teeth, fighting the same battle in his own head. Because he is selfless, because he will never stop fighting her war. She clings to him like a lifeline.

"Just breathe."

She nods, frantically. Breathe.

Breathe. In and out. In and out. Through the nose. In and out.

She can hear sirens wailing in the distance.

Will stops moaning, stops moving at all. He lies motionless on the ground, turned on his side. The music, muffled somewhat, is the only sound. El keeps her eyes fixated on the movement of Will's chest. Mike keeps one hand on Will's shoulder, the other around El's wrist.

"Breathe." He instructs her, again. She squeezes her eyes shut, then opens them again, gazes at Will. He lies, broken and unconscious on the tiles.

Several adults burst through the door, faces drawn tight and lips pursed. It gives them a start.

"What happened?"

Before they can answer, the doors are thrown open and a couple paramedics with a rolling stretcher appear at the end of the hallway.

Mike pulls El to her feet, and they move aside as the EMTs load Will onto the stretcher. One of them speaks into his radio, another scribbles on a notepad. The paramedics wheel him away, talking fast. One man stays behind, turning to Mike and El.

"Can you explain what happened?" Mike looks at El, then returns his gaze to the man.

"Yeah. We were in the hallway with him, he started coughing, and, um . . ." Mike's eyes fall to their clasped hands. "He collapsed, eyes rolled into the back of his head. He started tossing around, kicking and punching at the air." Mike fidgets. He leaves out the slugs.

"Is he gonna be okay? He's our friend."

The paramedic finishes writing something down, clicks his pen definitively.

"I suspect a seizure. I can't say." Mike bites his lip. His arm is still wrapped protectively around El's shoulders. He's shaking, and El can feel it. His whole body trembles.

"Can we at least go with him to the hospital?"

"No. Right now, he needs to be with his family." The man says. Mike

swears under his breath.

The paramedic turns to another man, some teacher Mike doesn't recognize.

"I need to contact his guardian, a parent."

"Joyce Byers is the one you want. I'll look for her phone number in the school's directory." The man says, hurrying off.

"I know her number." Mike says, giving the EMT a hard look.

"That would be greatly appreciated, Mr.-?"

"Wheeler."

"Mr. Wheeler."

The man writes her number down on the corner of his notepad. He leaves them in the hallway to find a phone.

The ambulance lights flash just outside, throwing red and blue beams across the walls and tiled floors of the cafeteria hallway.

Mike shivers.

A chaperone stands beside them, against the wall. She says something to him, but he's not listening. He starts down the hall, and El follows him. He keeps his arm around her, because she's unsteady on her feet.

They make their way through the empty gym. The chaperones have ushered people outside. They stand in groups, shivering in the cold. Some whisper intently. When El and Mike push through the front doors, people turn their heads. He ignores the feeling of a thousand eyes burning holes in the back of his head, too worried about El to pay them any attention. He takes a good look at El's face. She's white as a sheet, staring at the mass of cold and confused high school students. His grip around her shoulders tightens. She sways on the spot, looking as if she's about to pass out. He gives her a reassuring squeeze, keeping his gaze trained on her face.

Dustin and Lucas make their way to them, slogging through the snow, panting. Max trails not far behind. They look weary and a bit shell-shocked.

"What . . . happened? We saw . . . We saw Will on a . . . o-on a stretcher. Mike, what happened?" Dustin's words are few and far between as he tries to catch his breath. Mike doesn't answer right away, just watches as the ambulance pulls away from the curb and speeds out of the school parking lot. The sirens bounce around in his skull, piercing his very bones. He swallows.

"Mike!" Dustin shakes his friend's arm.

"Dustin!" Mike yells back, gritting his teeth. He wears a bitter, distant expression. El keeps her eyes on the road, pale-faced and trembling. She's still trying to stop the flood of flashbacks that linger so near to the surface of her consciousness. She's fighting a silent battle. Mike can feel it, and he tries to focus on her and answer their friends' questions at the same time.

"I don't know what happened. Will, he just . . I don't know he just fell down. He was coughing, and . . ." Mike glances at Max, at the people around them, undoubtedly listening in.

"I'll tell you later. Right now, we need to get to the hospital." Mike looks at El.

Are you going to be okay?

El meets his eyes, giving him a small nod. She is uncharacteristically withdrawn, reversing back to her old habits: a limited vocabulary and shy, weary mannerisms.

Yes. She grips his hand tighter, if that's even possible. His mind is muddled, split between her consciousness and the present.

Promise?

Promise.

Lucas snaps his fingers, shaking Mike out of his reverie.

"Um, are we going or not?"

"I'll come with you." Max says, quickly.

"No." Dustin, Lucas, and Mike say together. She looks taken aback, mouth immediately twisting into a grimace.

"Excuse me?" She says, bitterly. She folds her arms across her chest, defensive.

"You can't come."

"Why?" She snaps, raising her eyebrows.

"Because . . ." Dustin closes his mouth, then opens it again. He looks frightened, clearly at loss for words.

"Look. You can't come and we can't tell you why, so it's best if you just go home." Mike says, shortly.

"What's going on?" She says, quietly.

"Ask us no questions and we'll tell you no lies." Lucas says, shrugging. "But we have to leave. Right. Now."

. . .

Mike peers out of the back window, watching Dustin and Max as they make their way up the walk. Lucas stares at his hands, leaning back in the passenger seat. Mike looks at El. She looks as if she's about to shatter. Like she'll blow away in the wind. He reaches for her hand.

"Hey." He says, softly. Slowly, she meets his eyes. Her gaze is distant. His eyes demand her attention.

"Talk to me."

She gives her head a little shake, though she presses herself a little closer to him. She tries to make herself as small as possible, hands clasped and shoulders hunched.

In the quiet, away from the crowd and the noise, Mike finds it easier

to read the signals she's sending him. It's hard to navigate these waters, especially when this, newest obstacle is tossing her around on a treacherous sea. She's shaken, in shock, and trying to recover from a particularly bad flashback. Whatever happened to Will, it had an effect on her too.

Anger festers in his veins as Brenner's face swims in his mind's eye. El doesn't deserve this. Any of it. The flashbacks should be long gone, the lab a distant memory. The nightmares should be a thing of the past. She should be safe and happy and whole.

Haven't they taken enough from her already?

Mike's heart aches for her, and he finds himself gripping her hand so tightly, their interlocked fingers are turning white. She doesn't seem to mind.

Mike's mind wanders to Will, his feigned illness and missed classes. Pale, breakable Will. Will, who hasn't been himself this past month. Will, who is so very good at hiding things.

Internally, Mike's kicking himself. He should have known. He should've read the signs. He suspected something along these lines. He *knew* something was terribly wrong. And he didn't do anything about it.

Mike recalls those . . . things, the slugs, and shivers. They were familiar, something about the skin. The slime, the greenish gray color, the way they moved. They were otherworldly, like something you'd find in D&D, or perhaps, the Upside Down. Gooseflesh crawls over Mike's skin, and his nerves stand on end. His stomach drops at the thought of that . . . place.

I can't really describe it. It's hell.

A memory dislodges from his scattered thoughts. A memory from years ago, when Will came home from the hospital. He told them everything, then. He recounted his story.

It's hell.

Mike looks at El, presses his mouth to her forehead. Her face softens,

she lets slip a breath, a sort of sigh. She's tense, her whole body drawn and stiff, strung out like a wire.

"Look at me."

She does, briefly.

"Will's gonna be okay." Mike says, even though it's a lie. She knows it's a lie. He knows she knows.

He takes a breath.

I know what you felt. I can't imagine what you saw. But you can talk to me, El.

He speaks without a voice, and she clings to every word like it's the last he'll ever say to her.

El looks as if she's about to burst into tears. Lucas shifts uncomfortably. Mike ignores him.

Bad men. The demogorgon, Mike. Mike, I saw . . . things.

Flashback?

I don't know . . .

Nothing is going to hurt you while I'm standing, alright? It's not gonna happen.

Hurt you.

He swallows, wishing she'd give him more than a few words. She sounds like her old self, the girl they pulled out of the rain. And he hates it, and he hates that she won't look him in the eye.

This isn't her.

Mike gives a start as the car door swings open and Dustin scrambles inside, turning to face them. Melting snow clings to his curly hair. He takes a couple, heaving breaths, looking straight at the pair of them.

"What. Happened. Exactly?"

10. Asphyxiate

As Dustin pulls out of Max's driveway, Mike recounts their story, telling them about the slugs, and Will's moaning. He describes the frenzied kicking and clawing as best he can. Dustin and Lucas are horrified. They exchanged frightened glances. Dustin is white-knuckling the steering wheel. The silence is heavy.

"He was acting weird." Lucas says, voice a bit tremulous.

"That's the thing. He was, and we didn't do anything about it." Mike says, bitterly. "We didn't say a fucking word."

"We did." El says, hollowly. Mike looks at her in surprise.

"We went to his house. We talked to him at school. He didn't want to tell us. It's not . . ." She trails off, swallowing. She looks unsure, her tone reproachful and unconvincing. "It's not our fault." It takes a lot for her to get the last few words out, her voice wavering.

"He coughed up *slugs*?"

"Yeah."

"And they're from the Upside Down?"

"We don't know that."

"But you said . . ."

"I said they *look* like they could be from the Upside Down. They were slimy, and Will said everything there is all gooey and wet."

"Do you think the Gate's open?"

"I don't know."

"Well, wouldn't El know?"

Lucas looks at El, eyebrows knit.

"Is the Gate open?"

El stares at him, eyes wide. She shakes her head, briefly.

"Okay, so, the Gate's not open. But Will's puking up monsters from the Upside Down. How does that even make sense?"

"I don't know, Lucas!" Mike says, clearly irritated.

Dustin takes a turn too fast, causing Mike's collar bone to collide painfully with his seat belt. Lucas opens his mouth, closes it again, swallowing an insult.

The snow falls heavier, now. Dustin whips into the hospital parking lot, parking haphazardly. Mike climbs out of the car, still grasping El's hand. The four of them rush across the street.

El, slipping a little on the icy road, lets go of Mike's hand to stoop down and remove her heels. She holds them in one hand, running barefoot through the snow.

They make their way through the big glass doors. Mike approaches the front desk.

"Excuse me?" He says. The lady, a squat little nurse in purple scrubs looks up, peering at him over the top of her glasses.

"Yes?"

"Um, I'm looking for Will Byers. He was just brought here, and . . . I-I need to know what room he's in and if we can see him." Mike tells her. She drops her gaze to her computer monitor.

"One moment." She picks up the phone and dials a number, eyes roving over their faces. Her expression softens, but she says nothing. After a short conversation, she hangs up the phone.

"He's in intensive care, and he hasn't yet been assigned a room. You can sit in the waiting room." She says. She waddles out from behind her desk, looking them up and down. Her gaze falls onto El's bare feet, and she purses her lips.

"Follow me."

They follow the woman down the hall and past some double doors. She directs them towards the elevator.

"The ICU is on the third floor. Take the door to your left."

"Thank you." Lucas says. She gives them a little nod, turning her back on them. Mike taps his foot on the ground distractedly, eyes on the elevator. The metal doors open. Finding it empty, they pile inside. Dustin presses the number three, and the doors slide shut with a groan.

El has his hand in a death grip, taking quick, shallow breaths. He wonders if it has something to do with the elevator, the enclosed, cramped space. The lights above them begin to flicker. Lucas and Dustin exchange a nervous glance.

He wraps his arms around her and she grabs fistfuls of his shirt, burying her face in his chest.

"It's okay. It's okay, you're okay." He says, over and over again. His hand rests on her upper back, his voice muffled as he presses his lips to the top of her head.

After an eternity, the elevator makes its final stop and lets them off. Mike sighs, relieved.

The ICU waiting room is a bit familiar to El. She recalls the time Mike got shot.

The waiting. The waiting was the worst of it. She remembers his blood on her shirt, on her hands. She remembers the white tiles, and the attention she drew, because of her thinness and her bruises. She remembers Karen Wheeler's quiet weeping, and how she wished she could scream, but she couldn't. She was suffocating in her own panic and guilt and fear. He is her constant, but that day she almost lost him.

She tightens her grip on his hand to keep from falling. The lights are suddenly too bright. She's back in that boat, and the waiting is the worst part.

They drop into the uncomfortable, plastic chairs. Mike glances around the room, searching for Joyce or Jonathan. They aren't here. His eyes drop to the floor.

A lot of time passes, though he doesn't know exactly how long they sit there. At some point, Hopper bursts through the door. He looks panicked, almost crazed. Mike jumps to his feet without thinking, meeting the Chief's gaze. The man's eyes widen, he crosses the room in long strides.

"What happened?" He says, gritting his teeth. Mike takes a breath, meeting his eyes.

"It's Will. It happened at the dance. He had a sort of . . . fit." Mike looks around, shooting a pointed glance in the direction of some other people occupying the waiting room. "I think we should talk about it . . . in private."

Hopper nods, digging a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He shoves one between his teeth, making no attempt to light it.

"Come." He says, sharply. The Chief begins to walk towards the doors. Mike starts to follow him, stops when he feels El grab his hand, holding fast.

"I won't go far, I'll just be . . . in the hall." He says, a little surprised. Dustin and Lucas exchange a glance. El bites her lip, gives a nod. She lets him go.

He pushes through the doors, and Hopper leads him into a narrow, empty hallway. Hopper glances to either end of the hallway, then turns his attention to Mike.

"Talk."

Mike opens his mouth and closes it again, trying to find the right words.

"Well?"

"At the dance, we found Will in the hallway. He didn't look right, he was pale. He coughed, and this . . . thing. A slug or something, I don't

know, came out of his mouth. Like, he puked it up. And he coughed some more, and two more of them fell out." Mike pauses, searching Hopper's face. The Chief just stares.

"Slugs?"

"Yeah. These big, slimy green things. They're weird. They look like they could be f-from the, um, from the Upside Down."

Hopper runs a hand through his hair, slumping against the wall.

"Fuck."

He searches his pockets for a lighter, holds it against the cigarette in his mouth. His hands shake.

"I thought we were done with that place."

"We don't know for sure that they are . . ."

Mike trails off. Hopper places his hands on Mike's shoulders, giving him a rough shake.

"Kid, wake up. Where else would they come from?"

"I don't know, maybe . . ."

"A couple years ago, I never would've believed any of this. After I went into that hell hole, and saw everything for myself, I have a hard time believing it could be anything else."

Mike nods, staring at the floor. Hopper takes a step back, drags on his cigarette.

"Okay, go on. You haven't finished your story."

"After the third slug, Will fell on the floor. And he was kicking and clawing at thin air. He scratched me." Mike gestures to the thin cuts on his face, the dried blood.

"He was . . . moaning. He sounded like an animal. The sounds . . . they weren't human."

"Jesus Christ."

Hopper rubs a spot over his right eye, breathing out a long sigh. Mike continues to speak, watching the Chief closely.

"And that's when El sort of . . . freaked out."

"What happened to her?"

"She gets flashbacks, you know. From the lab. They're like nightmares, but they happen when she's awake. It's like a sort of daydream, but it's worse. It's like she's stuck in the past for a few minutes. I think she had one of those. A really, really bad one. I think it was because of Will. Maybe he sounded like the Demogorgon, or something. It set her off. She's still out of it, she's not talking to anyone."

"That's normal." Hopper says, a bit too casually.

"What did you say?" Mike says, lowly.

"That's normal. She's got PTSD, it's expected."

"It's *normal*? It's not normal. It shouldn't be normal. It's Brenner's fault. That bastard stole her childhood. It's not just PTSD. He fucked up her whole psyche. She has nightmares *every* night. And she still doesn't get it. She doesn't get that she's part of *our* world now. She doesn't get that she *matters*." Mike's voice rises with every word, but he doesn't stop. Blood rushes to his face.

Years of frustration and grief for El, anger at Brenner, and the terror of the night's events are all instrumental in his sudden outburst. The negative emotions conflict, battling for the spotlight. And he doesn't know whether he should be scared or angry or sad. His temper changes so suddenly, like a flicked light switch.

Hopper can see the wildness in his eyes, the grief masked with anger. There are tears in the boy's eyes.

Hopper places a hand on his chest. Mike takes a step backward, frustratedly wiping at his eyes. He doesn't know why he's telling Hopper any of this.

"She still calls him 'Papa', did you know that?"

"No."

"Something is wrong with her, Hopper. Something is wrong with Will. And I don't know how to fix it." He says, hollowly.

"I'm going to help you." Hopper says, staring at the floor.

"I know how much she means to you, kid. Hell, I think the whole town knows. And I'm going to help Joyce's boy."

Mike looks at him in surprise. Hopper is usually so stoic, so impassive. And now he's here, discussing Mike's love life. And actually being sympathetic. Mike shifts uncomfortably.

"There's something else you need to know. It's been going on for a month now. I don't know about the slugs, but he's been acting, um, *off*, for a while, a couple weeks at least. We figured he was just stressed out, because of school."

Hopper blows out another sigh, rolling his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger distractedly.

"Anything else?"

Mike shakes his head.

"Then let's go see the Byers boy."

. . .

Joyce greets them in the waiting room, looking shaken and pale. Hopper steps forward, embracing her. Jonathan follows close behind her, eyes downcast. Mike looks on, still clasping El's hand. Her fingers are laced with his, and her gaze is distant. Joyce's shoulder shake, and she wipes her nose with the back of her hand, taking a step back. Hopper gazes down at her, worried.

"He's . . . he's going to be o-okay." Her voice wavers, her eyes land on each of them in turn.

"He's resting now, and, um . . ." She stares at the floor. "You can go see him, if you want."

She leads them down the hall and through another set of doors, marked with the numbers 108-234.

"He's in room 202, almost all the way down." She says, walking quickly. Mike follows close behind her. Joyce stops in front of the door, tapping her lips.

The window curtains are pulled closed, and Will lies under the blankets, looking fragile and pale. Joyce stands in corner, allowing Mike, Dustin, Lucas and El to move closer to their friend. Mike pushes his way forward, staring at Will's face. He takes a breath. The sight of Will, his fragility, is like a slap in the face.

"They ran some tests . . . we have to wait to hear from the doctors. They don't really know what's wrong with him." Joyce explains.

Hopper sighs, running a hand over his stubble. Joyce collapses into a chair and begins to weep, head in her hands. Hopper gets up from his chair and makes to move toward her, but Jonathan beats him to it. He places a hand on her shoulder, looking solemnly at Will's sleeping form. Mike looks away, shifting his weight.

He looks at El, heart nearly bursting as he notices the tears that stain her cheeks, cutting traces in all the makeup. He wraps her in a tight embrace.

Jonathan meets Mike's gaze, grimacing.

"I think you owe us an explanation."

Mike recounts his story for the third time that day, delivering each bit of information slowly. Jonathan is horrified, his hands clenching into fists. Joyce goes white, cupping her hand over his mouth. Her face twists in horror as the realization dawns on her. Her eyes fill with tears.

El tightens her grip on Mike's hand.

"I have to tell you something." El says, quite suddenly. Everyone

looks at her, surprised.

"I . . ." She swallows. "I've known for a long time."

"What?" Jonathan says.

"About the slugs. He told me . . . about two weeks ago. He asked me not to tell anyone. Mrs. Byers, I'm so sorry. He didn't want to worry you . . ." El trips over her own words, tears welling in her eyes.

"El . . ."

"No. It's my fault. It's all my fault." She cries. "It's my fault this happened to him."

Mike's mind reels, he lets go of her hand. All this time . . . All this worry, and not knowing. She knew the whole time, and she didn't tell him. It takes a minute to sink in. The lights are too bright, the room spins.

He's so stupid. So stupid, for believing that she was just as ignorant as the rest of them. For believing that Will was just worried about a fucking Physics test.

Blood rushes to his face. After all this time, she knew.

"Oh, honey." Joyce says, shaking her head. She reaches for El, but El takes a step back.

"I can't . . . I'm sorry, I-I . . . I have to go." She turns, pushing through the door. .

"El, wait." Lucas says, as the door slams shut behind her. Mike blinks, staring after her. Everyone stares at him. He makes himself move, racing into the hallway.

He pauses, looking around, swearing under his breath.

He makes his way back to the waiting room, not knowing what to think, what to feel. He finds her, sitting on a landing in an empty stairwell. He freezes, not wanting to scare her or chase her away.

"El?" He says, quietly. She shifts, gives him no response. He makes his way down the steps, slowly, stopping on the landing. He takes a seat beside her, taking her hand. She won't look him in the eye.

"El, talk to me." He says, somewhat forcefully. He grits his teeth, fingernails digging into the soft skin of her wrist. She looks at him, surprised, eyes wide. She fights the urge to wrench her hand away.

"Why didn't you tell me?" He says, loudly. Blood rushes to his face. "Why didn't you tell me, El? Why did you keep this from me?" He's angry, confused. He tightens his grip on her wrist.

"I was trying to protect you." She says, pulling herself out of his grasp. She stands, mouth twisting into an agonized smile. She's fighting back tears, but they spill over her lashes anyway.

"You want to know why I didn't tell you? Because you would've done something stupid. You are so *stupid*, Mike. God, you're so stupid. You would've gotten yourself killed." She's screaming now, but she doesn't care.

"The nightmares are worse. The Upside Down, I can feel it. I feel it around me, all the time. I feel the negative energy, the fear. I don't think the Demogorgon is still alive, but I think *something* is happening. The Gate isn't open. If it was, I would know."

"You knew all of this, and you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't tell you because you'd try and save the day, like you always do. Like you did when they kidnapped me. Like you did when they put a bullet through your leg. Mike, don't you see?" Her voice is barely a whisper. She struggles to get the words out, and silent tears stream down her cheeks.

Mike cups her face in his hands. She sinks to her knees, and goes down with her, choking on his own tears.

"I didn't tell you because I can't lose you."

11. Diagnosis

"I'm sorry." She says, over and over again. He's saying it, too.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry. You're not going to lose me, Ellie. I'm gonna stick around and annoy you. For a long, long time." He caresses her hair, and she clings to him while she cries.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

He doesn't know how much time has passed since she made her wild flight into that empty stairwell. Their tears start to dry, though, and she's speaking again. That's all that matters . . . for now.

Silently, Mike pulls El to her feet. She clutches his arm, taking deep breaths, eyes stinging and throat sore. He wraps his arms around her, lips brushing her cheek gently, patiently. She doesn't shy away.

Eventually, they make their way back up the stairs, hand in hand. They find the others back in the waiting room. Dustin thumbs through a magazine, sucking on his bottom lip. A flicker of relief crosses his face when he catches sight of the pair, across the room.

"Everything . . . okay?"

Mike gives him a small nod, taking a seat. El drops into the chair beside him. Lucas, sitting in a chair across from them, is asleep and snoring lightly. Joyce sits in the corner, eyes fixated on the floor, teary and pale. Jonathan paces the opposite wall, hands shoved deep inside his pockets.

Hopper pushes his way through the doors to the waiting room, arms laden with coffees.

"Complimentary." He says, pushing the styrofoam cup into Mike's hand. He offers one to El. She hesitates, then reaches out to take it from him. She holds it with both hands, watching the steam rise from the inky black liquid. Dustin and Lucas toss it back, smiling contently as the warmth and caffeine enters their system.

Mike's gaze follows Hopper as he takes a seat beside Joyce, offering her a coffee. She gives her head a little shake, averting her eyes. Without a word, he takes her hand and holds fast.

Mike returns his attention to El, eyes following the arch of her brows and the slope of her nose, the ghosts of tears on her cheeks. He stares at her with a kind of agonized helplessness. It's a wild attempt to commit every detail, every inflection to memory. He stares at her as if she will disappear again, as if she will sink right through the floor or dissolve into thin air.

He takes her hand and presses her fingers to his lips, mouth twitching into a small smile. Contentedly, she closes her eyes. His heart liquefies, dissolves in a puddle at his feet.

The door to their left swings open, and a man in a white coat steps into the waiting room. His lips part, his eyes widen as he stares around the room, clearly surprised to see so many people gathered there. He fidgets nervously and pushes his glasses farther up the bridge of his nose, wiping his brow.

Joyce jumps to her feet, staring at the man. He glances at his clipboard, then steps forward to shake her hand.

"Hello, Ms. Byers, I'm Doctor Johnson. You are Will's mother, correct?"

Joyce gives him a small nod, eyes wide.

"Okay. We ran some tests, everything looks pretty good. The results, however, were inconclusive. We don't exactly what happened to your son. His MRI looks pretty normal, so I don't think it was a seizure." He pauses, glancing at her. "My guess, he's sleep deprived and stressed. His brain decided it couldn't handle it anymore, and it shut down." The doctor snaps his fingers.

"We're going to keep him overnight, to watch his vital signs for any abnormalities. He'll most likely be released tomorrow afternoon. Monitor his stressors, make sure he gets rest. If school is too much for him, let him stay home a few days, let him recover." The doctor pats Joyce's hand, offering a small, tired smile.

"He's going to be okay."

Joyce nods, clinging to his every word. A shadow crosses her face, and her shoulders seem to bend under the weight of the truth. The truth that festers in the back of their minds. The truth that is lost on every one of the doctors and nurses here. They remain ignorant.

Yes, this would be good news. Except for the missing details, the holes in the story. Mike thinks of the slugs, and everything El told him, all the missing pieces of their predicament. This is a problem that stretches far beyond anything a hospital can fix. This is their mess, and they'll have to deal with it. But for now, Will is safe and resting.

The doctor pulls Joyce aside to fill out some paperwork. Jonathan follows her. Hopper turns to the teenagers, sighing tiredly.

"You guys should go home. It's late. I called your parents a while ago, but they'll be worried about you. Go, and you can see him tomorrow." They nod their heads, knowing it's pointless to argue with the Chief.

The drive home is swathed in a heavy silence.

They make their way up the walkway to Mike's house. El is still barefoot, holding her shoes. She remains quiet, exhausted from the night's events.

Mrs. Wheeler, dressed in a fluffy bathrobe, descends upon them the moment they enter the doorway.

"Oh, thank God you're home." She says, hugging Mike. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, mom, we're fine."

"How's Will?"

"He's resting. The doctor said he's gonna be okay."

"Did they say what was wrong?"

"They don't know for sure." Mike replies, evasively. No point in worrying his mom about this.

Karen Wheeler pats her son's arm.

"Well, at least he's okay."

Mike nods, halfheartedly.

"Can Lucas, Dustin and El sleep over?"

"Michael . . ."

"Please? It doesn't make sense for them to drive home . . . it's one in the morning!"

"Oh, alright. Fine. Go straight to bed, and El sleeps in Nancy's room."

"Mom . . ."

"I mean it, Mike." Her eyes flash, but her face softens.

Dustin and Lucas exchange a glance, goofy smiles creeping over their face. Mike shoots them a look.

"And call your parents!"

Mrs. Wheeler turns her back on them, ascending the carpeted stairs. Dustin smirks, holding in laughter.

"Dude, she's totally worried about hanky panky."

Mike blushes, bright red. El grins.

"Shut up, Dustin."

. . .

Upstairs, El peels off the dress, letting it fall like a corpse onto the carpeted floor of Nancy's room. She searches the drawers as quietly as possible to avoid waking the oldest Wheeler girl. She finds pink pajama pants and a faded blue tank top, pulling them on. She pauses, taking a deep breath. Nancy stirs in her sleep.

In the bathroom, El washes the smeared makeup from her face, pulling her hair back in a ponytail. She leans against the countertop, staring into the white, porcelain sink. She times her breaths, focusing on each inhalation and exhalation. The exercise helps to relax her a little bit. In the quiet and solitude, the awful events of the night come rushing back, memories clawing at her consciousness like monsters in the night. She presses her fingers over her eyelids, trying to ward off the flood of images. A scream builds in throat, threatening to burst from her mouth like broken glass. She won't allow it. She flicks the light off and makes her way hurriedly down the stairs.

In the basement, she finds the boys sitting on the floor. Their heads are bent in quiet conversation, faces drawn and eyes downcast. She settled herself beside Mike, picking at the carpet.

They talk long into the early hours of the morning, mulling over everything that's happened and everything that probably will happen. Though she'd prefer not to dwell on it, El fills them in as best she can. She knows it's necessary. They need a clean slate, a bit of trust.

Dustin and Lucas don't yell at her for keeping Will's secret. There is no blame or accusation in their expressions, only sympathy and a little sorrow. Mike takes up her hand in his own, continuing his frequent, distracted tracing of the bones in her fingers and the furrows of her knuckles. Dustin pats her arm.

She can tell Mike is thinking about what happened in the hospital. He's guilty for yelling at her. She doesn't blame him. She'd be mad at herself, too. She wants to say something, but her tongue feels as if it's coated with lead and she can't think straight.

The clock reads 4:38 AM. Lucas is already dozing off. Mike and Dustin drop into empty silence, a definite shift from their whispered chatter just minutes earlier. El rises to her feet, swiping her hand over her eyes like a cat. She blinks in the semi-darkness, and Mike leans over to give her a quick peck on the cheek.

"Night, El."

"Night, Mike."

Upstairs, Mrs. Wheeler has left a sleeping bag by Nancy's door. She carries it into the room, lays it out on the floor. She climbs inside of it, wincing as Nancy mumbles in her sleep. The girl doesn't wake.

El wraps her slender arms around herself, turning to stare at the shred of light leaking in from the crack under the door. She's been to hell and back, physically and mentally exhausted. She drops into a deep slumber in seconds.

. . .

El wakes to a very disheveled and exhausted Mike, struggling with an explosion of pancake batter. It's in his hair and on his shirt, splattered over the countertop. He gives her a sheepish grin as she enters the kitchen. She bites her tongue, trying and failing to suppress her laughter. He shoots her a look, shaking his head. His mess of hair dances, and drops of batter fly in every direction. The sight is ridiculous.

"What are you doing?" She asks, innocently.

"What does it look like? Making pancakes." He pops some chocolate chips in his mouth.

She nods, crossing the room to take the spatula from his hands. He steps back, dropping into a chair. El sighs, pouring more batter onto the pan.

"Where's Dustin and Lucas?"

"Still asleep." He says.

El doesn't say anything for a while. He stands, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

"You alright?"

El nods.

"Yeah. Just tired."

"Me too."

"We have to go see Will."

"I know."

"And we're going to help him, okay? We're gonna fix this, and if there's another gate, or another Demogorgon, so be it." El shakes her head.

"Mike, stop."

"Just listen to me, El. We're gonna get through this. And you can't walk around sheltering me from things and lying to me. You can't protect me from this, El. We're in this together. Alright?"

Mike plants a kiss on her forehead.

"El?"

"Mmmmm?"

"I love you."

. . .

Nancy is hesitant to leave for her second semester of college, after everything that's happened. Still, things progress as planned, and Mike finds himself standing in the driveway that same morning, carrying her suitcase. He pops the trunk, grumbling to himself as he heaves the thing into her little car. El, Lucas and Dustin join him outside, sipping from juice pouches. Mike raises an eyebrow.

"Where'd you find those?"

"In your garage."

"Oh."

Nancy dashes out of the front door, looking flustered.

"Okay, okay. I have to leave. If I don't go now, I'll hit traffic. It's a long drive." She says, tossing her purse into the passenger seat.

"Alright, hugs." She says, abruptly, turning around. El hugs the older

girl.

"Call me if you need me, Ellie. Take care of Mike, alright?" El nods, stepping back. Nancy hugs Mike, quickly.

"I'll see you over Spring Break. Call me. Tell me if Will's okay, I want to know everything." She steps back, smiling at them. She gives Mike a sharp look.

"You two, behave."

Lucas smirks, shoves Mike's shoulder teasingly.

Mrs. Wheeler opens the front door, Holly tagging along behind her.

"Hold on, Nance."

She wraps her daughter into a tight embrace.

"Take care of yourself."

"Bye, Sissy." Holly says, hugging Nancy around the middle. "Bye, Hollywood." Nancy kneels, kissing the youngest Wheeler on the cheek.

"I love you guys, see you soon!"

Nancy climbs into her car. Mike watches her pull out of the driveway and down the road, whipping out of sight. El wraps her slender arms around his middle. She's quiet. He looks at her, but her eyes are fixated distantly on the empty road. Her mind, no doubt, racing circles around their ill-fated future.

12. Bedridden

Mike holds the compass in his open palm. Dustin walks beside him, peering at a slightly crinkled map of Hawkins. Their feet crash through the twigs and dead plant matter. On this Saturday morning, early March, the snow has mostly melted. The sky is cloudless and a brilliant sapphire. Lucas is away on a fishing trip. El is stuck in bed with the flu. Only Dustin was available to join him on this wild trek through the wooded area surrounding Hawkins.

"What are we doing all the way out here?" He breathes, clutching his side. Mike shakes his head.

"This is the only place we haven't checked. We need to be sure." Mike says.

"I thought El said the Gate isn't open."

"Not *yet*. Plus, the compass was funny this morning. It comes and goes, sometimes it's normal, sometimes it's not. It's weird."

"I thought El opened the Gate last time." Dustin says, giving Mike an incredulous look.

"She did. But the Demogorgon. can, too. Remember? It could come through walls and stuff . . . "

"The Demogorgon is dead."

"We don't know that."

"So . . . you're saying . . . the Demogorgon *might* be alive. It *might* be able to open another gate. And the thing that's going on with the compasses is . . . what exactly?"

"I don't know . . . maybe it's a sign or something. It's a sign the Demogorgon is getting stronger."

"We don't even know if it's alive!"

Mike sighs, exasperatedly.

"Look, I just want to be *ready*. I'm not letting that . . . thing . . . take El or Will or anybody again, alright? If we know where the Gate is, maybe we can figure out how to close it. We can kill it before it gets the chance to do any damage."

"But there's no gate . . ."

"Dustin!" Mike says, obviously frustrated. He kicks a rock.

February passed quickly. Will's illness only got worse, now approaching the point where he only comes to school once or twice a week. On a good day, he's almost like his old self. Usually, though, it's bad. The slugs continue to ravage his body, making hideous and terribly painful appearances. They exit his body like it's a sinking ship, clumsily and with haste.

The thought makes Mike's stomach turn. It's happened only twice in his company, the night of the Snow Ball and once after. It's terrifying.

Will says he's okay, but he does a bad job trying to convince them. He's not okay. He hasn't been okay for a long time.

Joyce is a mess, reverting back to her anxious, delusional self. Mike witnesses her in a panicked fit after one of Will's particularly bad coughing spells. She tries to stay strong for him, but they can see it. She's caving under the weight of it all.

Will gets through it. He handles it as he always has: quietly, carefully. He fights. And Mike, Lucas, Dustin and El are there to catch him when he stumbles, when he's so weak from dry-heaving into the toilet bowl that he can barely stand.

"Hey, whatever happened to Max?"

"What d'ya mean?"

"I mean, did you ever take her out again?"

"Hell no. She wanted nothing to do with me after what happened at the Snow Ball. I guess she doesn't like being kept out of the loop."

"Shame. I think she was starting to like you."

Dustin makes an incredulous noise in the back of his throat.

"Well, if she ever found out the truth, she'd think we're all completely nuts. And I guess we are, especially that girlfriend of yours. She's batshit crazy." Dustin says, laughing. Mike clears his throat loudly, glowering at Dustin.

"She's also saved your ass. Like, a thousand times."

"I know. And she's one of my best friends. Don't get me wrong, man. El is a badass. Totally. Fucking. Awesome. But we don't know Max well enough to let her in on our little eggo-loving secret, do we?"

"You're right." Mike says.

After another hour of walking, Mike calls it quits.

"Nevermind, let's just go back. The compass is normal again, anyway. It's not worth it." He says, shoving it in his pocket with finality.

Dustin groans, exasperated. Mike's mind races. They've checked everywhere. Nothing.

But the compasses are acting up.

He keeps one in his backpack, one on his bedside table. Some mornings, he wakes to find them a few degrees off, or totally messed up. Sometimes, though, they're completely normal.

He can't push away the feeling that something bad is coming.

It drives him crazy, this not-knowing, this powerlessness. Something is going to happen, one day. Hell will break loose, and he won't be able to stop it.

He thinks of El, of the dying girl in Mr. Clark's science classroom. He thinks of the recurring nightmares that feature her corpse as the main attraction. He thinks of the flashbacks. As Will grows weaker, it seems, her flashbacks become more frequent, more terrible.

It's overwhelming. The events of that week in '83 are still haunting them. They are tied up in strings, caught in an endless loop. It's

completely, utterly insane. And it is his reality.

When Mike gets home, he goes straight to the phone. El picks up on the second ring.

"Mike?"

"Yeah, hey, how're you feeling?" He says. She's been bedridden for a few days now. She begins to speak, but she is overcome with a coughing fit. He winces, sympathetically.

"Terrible." She says. Her voice is ragged.

"I'm gonna come a see you, tonight. My mom asked me to watch Holly. I'll bring her over and we can watch a movie or something."

"Oh, Mike. Don't. You're gonna get . . . whatever I have. Becky says it's the flu. I'm very convinced that I'm dying." He sighs, shaking his head.

"I don't care if I get it, I'm coming to see you. I haven't seen you in *forever*."

"It's been three days."

"That's three days too many, I'm coming."

"Mike." She reprimands, playfully.

"See you soon."

"Bye."

Mike leaves the house around five, with Holly sitting in the backseat of his mom's car. He goes through the McDonald's drive-through, picking up dinner for the two of them, and a burger and fries for El. Just in case.

Holly begins stuffing her face immediately, grinning at him. He smiles, giving her a pointed look in the rear view mirror.

"Don't eat Ellie's burger, and don't get crumbs all over mom's car."

She'll yell at me."

"Okay." She says, bobbing her head.

He pulls up to the curb outside El's house on the corner, near downtown. He grabs Holly's hand, pulling her up the front steps.

Becky answers the door, cigarette in hand. She's wearing a red dress, a black sweater slung over her arm.

"Hey, Mike. El told me you might be coming. Come on in." She says, ushering them inside. She closes the door behind them.

"I'm going out. She's upstairs." Mike nods, still holding Holly's hand. He takes the steps two at a time. He pauses, standing in her doorway.

"El?"

She stirs, emerging from a nest of blankets. She blinks at him, peering through many layers of fabric. The sight is oddly funny.

"Hey." She says, coughing a little. She shivers. "Hi, Holly."

"Ellie!" Holly says, rushing up to her bedside.

"I wouldn't get too close, Holls. She's contagious." Mike says, grinning. El shoots him a look. Her eyes are glassy, her hair mussed. Heaps of tissues are strewn across the room. She spots the McDonald's bag and her face brightens considerably.

"You brought me food?"

"Yes ma'm." He walks over, taking a seat on the edge of her bed. He hands her the bag. El nibbles on a fry, looking at him thoughtfully. He stares back, amused.

"What?"

"Nothing." She says, innocently. Mike looks away, watching Holly as she explores every nook of El's room. It's small, with a single window. There's a turntable on her bedside table, next to the old Super Com. There are several books on shelves, a couple posters on the walls,

which are painted a soft green. It's not much, but definitely a huge improvement from the lab or the fort in the basement. He shivers, pushing the thought from his mind. She shoots him a questioning look, but says nothing, still munching on the french fries.

She leans back, licking her lips.

"It's like the gates of heaven have opened in my mouth." She sighs.

Mike laughs. She probably picked up that little quip from Dustin who knows how long ago.

Holly takes a book from one of the shelves and trots over to Mike, shoving it into his hands.

"Read." She says, folding her arms. "Read us a story, Mikey."

Mike looks at Holly, then at El, who nods encouragingly. He runs a hand through his hair, then opens the book. El smiles, pulling the blanket up to her chin. Mike starts to read, glancing at El every few lines. She blinks often, watching him through tired eyes. Holly sits beside her, cross legged on the bed. Her little fists are tucked up under her chin. Eventually, El nods off. He stops reading. Holly pats him on the shoulder, looking at El solemnly.

"She's tired." Holly says, matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, she is." Mike says, nodding.

"She's sick."

"She'll get better."

"You love her." Holly says, simply. She crawls over to take the book out of his hands. She turns the pages, touching the words.

"Yeah, I do."

Mike is quiet for a minute, looking at his little sister. He pats her shoulder, giving her a smile smile.

"When did you get to be so smart?"

. . .

Mike insists they go downstairs for a change of scenery. El agrees, letting him lead her out of the darkened room. She grips the stair rail tightly, like she's afraid she'll fall. All three of them pile onto the sofa. Mike flips through the channels, eventually settling on *101 Dalmatians*, Holly's favorite movie. El wraps herself in a thick blanket, throwing it over her head so only her eyes and nose are visible. He can feel her shivering.

"Can I braid your hair, Ellie?" Holly says, about ten minutes into the movie. El nods, pulling the blanket off of her head.

Holly begins to comb through it with her little fingers. El's hair is slightly wavy, reaching to the middle of her back. Holly begins to plait it in intricate braids. El sits still, gladly letting the youngest Wheeler work her magic. Mike watches, grinning in amusement.

Soon, they've moved on to manicures. Holly's got a whole spread of nail polish lined up on the edge of the coffee table. She giggles as El goes to work on her toes, painting them sparkly blue. *101 Dalmatians* is still going, but nobody's really paying attention. Before long, El has practically wrestled Mike into a headlock trying to paint his fingernails bright pink.

"Stop moving." She says, tongue in between her teeth. She's wearing that look: the same look that she gets when she's about to flip a van or explode someone's brain with her mind. Mike fidgets nervously, trying to see what she's doing.

"Why is this a common occurrence? First it's dress-up and makeovers, now it's a mani-pedi?" He whines.

"What do you expect? You guys make me play D&D and watch Star Wars *every day*."

"I thought you love Star Wars."

"I do. Like, more than life, but we need some girl time, right Holly?"

"Mmmhmmm."

"Now shut up and hold still."

. . .

El is back on her feet two days later, tired but no longer feeling as if she's about to spontaneously combust or drown in her own snot. She finds herself in Mike's room, with the boys.

They're all sprawled on the floor, doing homework. Mike and Dustin take turns quizzing each other, swearing loudly when they miss a question. El is struggling through a humongous pile of make-up work that never seems to end. Will sits on Mike's bed, reading a book with that familiar crease in his brow, face drawn and hollow. Lucas scribbles an essay hastily on a crumpled piece of paper, crossing things out and muttering to himself every few minutes.

El looks up, her train of thought derailing as Will's hardcover book slips from his fingers and tumbles to the floor. He's sits, rigid and pale. His hands immediately go to his mouth. Without a word, he stands and bursts out of the room, dashing down the hallway.

El springs to her feet, closely followed by Lucas. She reaches the bathroom door, pushing on it.

Locked.

She doesn't hesitate. She envisions the inter-workings of the lock in her mind's eye, hears the click of metal. The door swings open. She doesn't notice the hammering in her temple and warmth on her upper lip.

Will is slumped over the toilet. Several of the slugs, at least four or five, splash into the water. They're big, almost a foot long.

"Will . . ." She says, stepping toward him. He stops heaving, straightens. El moves toward him, reaching out a hand to steady him. He turns to face her, and something is off. There's a wild look in his eyes, a sort of hunger. She can't put her finger on it, but a sharp fear twists in her gut. Before she has time to react, Will's fingers lock around her throat.

Black spots swim before her eyes. Her fingers claw weakly at the

back of his hands, feet kicking uselessly. She can't hear, can't think. She opens her mouth, fighting for air.

Will's eyes are shadowed and crazed. Spit dribbles down his chin. His skin is slowly turning an odd, gray color.

She feels his grip loosen, feels herself falling to the floor. Her knees slam into the tiles. She gasps, sucking in breaths of air. Lucas has her by the arm, pulling her up and out of the bathroom. She struggles against his grasp, trying to see what's going on. She sees Will, writhing and moaning, gray skin and wild eyes. Almost alien . . .

Lucas has one arm across her shoulders, hand gripping her wrist.

"El? El, can you hear me?"

"Mike . . ."

"He's okay, Dustin's helping him. Listen, I need you to stay here, alright?" Lucas says. El opens her mouth to respond, but stops mid sentence. Her breathing quickens, her lashes flutter.

"El?" Lucas says, tightening his grip on her hand. She sways, then tumbles to the floor. And everything goes black.

She lies on the white tile floor of the lab. Above her, the lights flicker and pop. Slowly, she gets to her feet. She's barefoot, dressed in that wretched hospital gown. Blood. Blood is everywhere, spattered across the floor, staining her hands. The walls are painted crimson. She can smell it. She can taste it. And there's so much of it. She steels herself, continues down the hallway. It never seems to end, the tiles and the flickering lights and the blood stretching for miles.

The screechy whistling of the Demogorgon echoes in her head. To her left, the thing bursts from the wall. It forces her to the ground. It's hot breath kisses her cheeks. The weight of it on her chest and the stench of rotting flesh makes it impossible to breath. It's terrible, rotting fingers tear into her skin, and she opens her mouth to scream.

Before he even has time to fully register the sight before him, his

body reacts. His fist connects with Will's jaw. He releases his grip on El's neck. Mike has time to see Lucas helping her to her feet before the wind is knocked out of him, and he falls onto the bathroom floor.

He finds himself pinned between the toilet seat and the cabinet. Will is on top of him, clawing and punching. Mike tries to fend him off, meekly, taking a blow right below his left eye.

"Will!" He yells, raising his hands to protect his face from Will's fists. It's the look in his eyes that scares Mike the most. The wildness. The distance and silent chaos.

Mike feels the weight lifted off of him as Dustin comes to his aid. He scrambles away, hands pressing into Will's wrists, knees on his chest. He pins him against the floor. His friend is thrashing, eyes rolling and wild. Dustin is holding his legs.

"Will!" Mike says, heartbeat loud in his ears. "Will, stop. It's us. Can you hear me?"

The boy gives no response. His skin is grey, almost bruised. His lips are thin and pale. His pupils are dilated severely. Mike continues to shout, talking to him. His cheek burns where he got hit and he tastes blood.

Eventually, Will's wild attempts to free himself cease. He lies on the ground, panting, eyelids fluttering.

"Will?" Mike says, tentatively. He doesn't dare loosen his grip. Not yet.

"Mike." Will says. He gazes at Mike, then Dustin. His eyes fill with tears.

"W-what happened to me?"

Mike lets go of his wrists, clambering off his friend. He ignores the pounding in his head. His eye has begun to swell.

Will sits up, covering his mouth as another coughing fit overcomes him. Mike gazes at him wearily, putting a hand on his shoulder.

Dustin sits back on his heels, clutching his chest.

"Will . . ." Mike begins. He trails off, breath hitching in his throat. At the same time, Lucas begins to shout from the hallway.

"Mike!" He yells. "Mike, it's El. Dude, she just passed out!" Mike is on his feet, running into the hallway.

"El!" He says, scrambling to her side. She's crumpled on the floor, looking pale and fragile. She's whimpering, fingers twitching and eyes darting about beneath the lids.

He lays a hand on her shoulder, reaching for her mentally. There's no response. He curses himself. He's never been good at the mental communication. And he needs it, to reach her. He can feel her, but she's distant. Guarded. His own fear overwhelms anything else. His heart pounds, stomach wrenching with fear.

"El? El, can you hear me?"

El?

"She's not waking up." Lucas says. Mike's hand finds her own, and her body tenses under his fingers.

"Let's get her up." He says, scooping her into his arms. She couldn't weigh more than a hundred pounds soaking wet. Her brow is furrowed, her body rigid. At least she's breathing.

Mike lays her on his bed, as gently as possible. Lucas gazes over Mike's shoulder, weary.

"El?" Mike says, again. He gives her shoulder a little shake. No response. He drags his desk chair over to her bedside and sits, hands clasped around her wrists.

"El, wake up."

Mike fights the panic growing in his chest. He swallows, trying to ignore the lump in his throat. This helplessness kills him a thousand times over. He cannot break her barriers. Mentally, he's useless. He can't help her. And he keeps saying her name, like a mantra or a

prayer. She remains unresponsive and pale.

Lucas shifts his weight. Dustin appears in the doorway. Will hangs back, a few steps behind him. His skin has returned to normal, for the most part.

He locks eyes with Mike, swallowing hard. He slumps against the door frame.

"How's your jaw?" Mike says, immediately guilty for hitting his friend. He did what he had to do. Will would've hurt El, badly.

"It's fine." Will says, quickly. He gazes at El, and his face twists into a grimace.

"Dustin told me . . . everything. Everything I did. . . " He says. His eyes are red around the edges. He looks like he's about to be sick. He takes a deep breath. Mike doesn't know what to say, searches for words.

"Is she . . . okay?"

"I don't know." Mike says. "This happened last time. Sort of. She gets flashbacks. I don't know why she's not waking up . . ." He swallows. Will nods, blinking.

"Are you okay, dude?" Lucas asks. Will nods.

"Will?"

"Yeah?"

"It's not your fault." Mike says. Nobody speaks for a long time after that. Mike keeps a careful eye on the rise and fall of El's chest.

"I . . . I have to go. I'm sorry . . ." He turns, disappears down the hallway.

"Will, wait . . ." Mike says, starting to get to his feet.

Lucas beats him to it, following Will down the stairs. Dustin looks at Mike, then El, then back at Mike. He runs a hand through his head of

curls, chewing on his lip.

"Mental."

13. So Much Depends

She wakes to a cacophony of loud, anxious voices. Dustin's face swims into her line of vision.

"Guys, she's awake."

She blinks, hand immediately going to her throat. It's hard to swallow, hard to breathe. With a quick observation, she realizes she's lying on Mike's bed. A blanket had been thrown hastily over her. She struggles to sit up, and somebody puts a hand on her shoulder, halting her. Mike is there, sitting by the edge of the bed. He's sporting a black eye and several, bleeding fingernail marks. He kisses her briefly. She reaches for his hand. She's still shaky from the vision of the lab, the Demogorgon. From being suffocated...

"Hey, El. How're you feeling?"

"Where's Will?" She says, ignoring his question. Lucas looks at her, biting his lip.

"He left. We couldn't stop him . . . " Lucas says. "Whatever happened to him, it didn't last very long."

"He went crazy." Dustin interjects, eyes wide. El meets his eyes.

"He tried to kill you." Lucas says. "He tried to fight us. He was moaning and kicking around. After a while , he went back to normal . . . sort of."

Mike is quiet, eyes fixated on her. El slumps back, her body suddenly feeling very heavy. Tears spring in her eyes, and she doesn't make an effort to hide them. Flashes swim at the edge of her consciousness. She can still feel the Demogorgon's breath on her cheeks, Will's fingers around her throat. Mike sits on the edge of the bed, putting an arm around her shoulders. She tries to relax, leaning into Mike, but every muscle is tense and unyielding. Dustin and Lucas fall silent, exchanging worried glances. Mike buries his face in her hair.

"You look like hell, Ellie." Dustin says, giving her a small smile. It gets

him a half-hearted laugh. El wipes her nose on her sleeve, staring down at the fraying blanket draped across her legs.

"He went psycho. Completely mad, like an animal."

"Did you see his skin?" Lucas says. Mike nods.

"It was gray . . . and shiny.

"Like the Demogorgon, but different. It didn't have the weird flower petal face." Dustin says.

"Did the Demogorgon have legs that long?"

"I dunno . . ."

El's breath catches in her throat, and she shuts her eyes to keep the room from spinning. She can feel her hands trembling, feels the weight of the memories threatening to crush her. Mike flinches, as if he's been slapped in the face.

Dustin recoils at the look on his face, drops his eyes to the floor. Mike returns his attention to El, mentally reaching for her, giving her an anchor. She's fighting for air, silently battling more flashbacks.

Mike's fingers trace the bruises that are beginning to blossom on her neck. She gives her head a small shake, mind foggy. She feels like her body is encased in lead. Dead weight.

Mike's heart breaks for her.

"It's okay." He says, quietly. His fingers follow the arch of her wrist. "It's okay, you're here. I'm here. You're safe."

Safe.

She wishes that were true.

. . .

El spends the day on the couch in the living room. She flips through the channels on their TV, trying to take her mind off of everything

that's happened. Mike calls, and they talk for a long time. She sits at the kitchen table, twisting the cord around her finger. He talks about the new D&D campaign and how they might go get some ice cream later because it's been so warm, especially for March. Though the conversation provides some distraction, her mind runs circles. And everything comes back to Will.

The doorbell rings, and she goes to answer it.

He stands on her porch, hands deep in his pockets. Her expression softens.

"Will. . ."

"I'm sorry." He says, quickly. His lip trembles.

"I'm sorry, El. I'm . . . s-so s-sorry."

He shatters on the front porch. She rushes toward her friend and former foster-brother, wrapping him in a tight hug. He hugs her back, and he's crying hard. She's crying too.

"Something's . . . wrong . . . with me, El." He gasps, through gritted teeth. "I'm the monster."

It's like a slap in the face. A reminder of another world, an experiment they called Eleven, and a time when she believed she was a monster, too. El grips his shoulder tightly, shaking her head.

"No, Will. You're not. You are not a monster."

No, El. You're not the monster. Do you understand? You saved me.

"You're not the monster." She takes a deep breath, feeling the hot tears drip down the slope of her cheeks.

"You're sick." She says, voice muffled by the fabric of his jacket. "It's a relapse. But we'll get through it."

"I'm so sorry." His voice is muffled by the fabric of the sweatshirt she's wearing, almost inaudible.

"It's not your fault." She says, stepping back. Will wipes his eyes, staring at his feet. She keeps talking, repeating the words, putting the pieces back together.

"It's not your fault."

. . .

Joyce is falling apart. She knows what happened. She knows it's only going to get worse. Hopper knows. He stays late at the Byers' household, talking things over with Will. Will trusts the Chief, regards him as a sort of father figure. He tells Hopper everything, and Hopper listens.

On the outside, Hopper is stoic and unruffled. Behind closed doors, however, he's struggling. He's worried about the boy, about those other kids. A storm is coming, and he's not sure they'll have the same luck this time around.

"If you feel an attack coming on, breathe. Like we practiced. Time your breaths, keep your mind clear. Maybe you can avoid another attack." Hopper sits in the Byers' living room, talking to Will.

He raises his eyebrows.

"You think that'll work?"

"Honestly, kid. Until we can figure out exactly what's going on, I'm not sure what we can do."

"Are you serious? I *hurt* people, Hopper!" Will says, getting to his feet. He's shouting, and there are tears in his eyes. "I hurt people, and I couldn't do anything about it. I hurt El, and Mike . . ."

Hopper holds up a hand, looking at Will. He lays a hand on the kid's shoulder.

"Will. I know. I know this is scary. I am being completely honest with you. I'm doing everything I can to help you, Will. We're going to find out what's happening to you, and we're going to stop it. Until then, I think breathing exercises will help. Clear your head."

"That's not gonna work." Will says, dully.

"It helped El."

. . .

El wakes from a bad nightmare, drenched in sweat and trembling from head to toe. She doesn't call Mike. She doesn't call anybody. She breathes.

The nightmares come so often, and still, there's no getting used to them. She makes her way down the stairs, opening the front door. Outside, she closes her eyes, sucking in breaths of fresh air. The wind chimes whisper a greeting. Out here, her heartbeat slows. Her mind clears.

Nightmare?

She's not surprised. He probably woke up from the same, terrifying visions. He knows about the nightmares. She's not alone in this battle.

Yes.

Want to talk?

Yes.

Do you like poetry?

Poetry? I like the poems we read in class . . .

Okay, well there's this poem by a guy named William Williams. It's goes like this: "So much depends upon / A red wheelbarrow / Beside the white chickens / Glazed with rainwater"

There's a gap in his thoughts, waiting for her response.

Say it again.

And he does, pushing William William's words through the millions of tangled threads.

You can build on it. Like . . . So much depends upon / The girl with a

number for a name / And the day I was lucky enough / To be out in the rain . . .

She smiles. And he feels it, miles away.

Beautiful.

. . .

El doesn't have time to react. She doesn't have time to breathe.

Will's eyes are empty. Somehow, his limbs seems skeletal and longer. His skin is gray. His breathing is shallow. The moans and screams that escape his mouth are haunting. It makes the hairs on her arms and neck stand on end.

It is too familiar. It's different than before. It's worse. Will is no longer recognizable.

This is not Will. It's not the Demogorgon, either. But a monster. Something otherworldly. The scent of blood makes her sick. She doesn't have time to breathe.

Will attacks Mike. He loses his balance under the weight. El watches, frozen and horrified, as Mike falls backwards. There's an earsplitting *crack* as Mike's head connects with the concrete.

"Will! Will, stop!" Lucas is yelling.

The thing rips into his skin with its fingernails, drawing blood on contact. It keeps hitting Mike, over and over again. Mike doesn't react, rendered unconscious from the blow to his head. Its hand slams against Mike's throat in an attempt to suffocate him.

El pulls herself out of her reverie, stirred into action. She lifts her hand, taking a deep breath. The thing is thrown backwards, off of Mike. Dustin darts forward, kneeling beside the bleeding boy.

El reaches for Will, willing herself to remain on her feet, grounded in the present. But her anchor is gone, and it's hard to stay conscious. The Monster-Will struggles against the invisible force holding it in place, pinned against the asphalt. The noises that it makes are

terrifying and inhuman.

"Will." She says, reaching for the boy disguised as a monster. It is the stuff of nightmares

"Will, listen to me." El says, approaching him. Shadows linger at the edges of her consciousness. She can smell Papa's cologne, hear his voice. She's dizzy. And she's so scared . . .

"Remember what I . . . w-what I told you. You're . . . not the . . . monster. Will, can you hear me?"

You're not the monster.

Still, it struggles. It's crazed, demented.

You're my friend. You're my brother. Will, come back to us.

It stops moving. Its chest heaves, pupils dilating and expanding rapidly.

Come back to us.

El watches, helpless and unable to move or think, as the monster slowly becomes Will. His skin returns to its normal hue, his arms and legs are shorter. He coughs, reaching for breath.

El releases her grasp. She falters, feeling all her strength fade. She feels like someone has gouged a hole in her and all the energy she possessed just moments ago is leaking out onto the asphalt. She feels heavy. The ground lurches under her feet.

Blood trickles out of her nostrils. Lucas appears by her side, supporting her weight. She grips his wrist to keep herself upright, mopping her face.

Will straightens, trembling violently. He looks deathly, his face bloodless. His gaze reaches across the road, eyes landing on Mike. El feels her breath catch in her throat.

Will swallows, tears rolling down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry." He says, voice breaking. He takes off, running down the street. El makes her feet move, attempting to follow him. Lucas stops her, shaking his head.

"Let him go."

She crosses the street, sprinting towards Mike. She throws herself beside him. There are several wounds along his arms and collarbone. Bruises pattern his skin.

His eyelids flutter.

"Mike . . ."

"El."

He tries to sit up.

"No, man. Stop moving, you're gonna make it worse." Dustin says, trying to push him back. He and Lucas exchange solemn glances. This isn't the first time Mike has wound up unconscious and bleeding on the road.

"Where . . . where's Will?" Mike says, his voice ragged. He sits up, ignoring their protests. His hand finds the place where he hit his head, wincing. His fingers come away smeared with blood.

El brushes the hair out of his eyes, putting an arm around his shoulder. He leans heavily against her.

"Do you want to stand?" She asks, pressing her lips against his cheek. He nods. She helps him to his feet. He sways a little, gripping her arm. Lucas puts a hand on his shoulder. Dustin swallows, looking panicked.

"This is crazy." He says. "Should we go after him?"

El nods. She's leaning on Mike as much as he's leaning on her. They are both unsteady, weak.

"Yeah. I'm worried he's gonna do something stupid." Lucas says.

"Mike needs to go home." El protests, not taking her eyes off the battered, bleeding boy.

"No." Mike says, quickly. "No. Dustin, let's get your car. We need to find him. And fast."

"Mike . . ."

"El, listen. He's going to do something stupid. We need to stop him."

"Your head . . ." She protests.

"I'll be fine." He says, gently. Her eyes graze his face, and she inhales sharply.

"Okay." She says, letting out a long breath. "Let's go."

The walk to Dustin's house is short. The pile into his car. He tears down the street, tires squealing.

"How do we know where he is?"

"You think he went home?"

"No." El says, shaking her head. "No. He didn't go home. I can find him . . ." She closes her eyes.

"El, you don't have to . . ."

"Shut up, Mike."

She takes a breath, reaching for their friend. It's hard, without a bath. But she's stronger than before. And he's rightside up, which makes it easier to find him. She uses the car radio to channel him. The headlights flicker. The radio floats between channels randomly and rapidly.

"W-what are you doing?" Dustin says, worriedly.

"Just drive."

She can feel him. His mind is alien, so different from Mike's, and yet similar too. . . She can feel the storm of conflicting emotions, the

anger and fear and guilt. She wills herself into his consciousness, sees an expanse of trees. It's oddly familiar . . .

"The quarry." She gasps, eyes flying open.

"Oh my God." Dustin says, fingers tightening around the steering wheel. He swerves, involuntarily. The car behind them honks. "Oh my God oh my God oh my God."

El glances at Mike. He swallows, eyes widening.

"The quarry?" He says, weakly. El nods, and a terrible weight settles in her gut. The look in his eyes confirms her worst suspicions.

"The quarry."

. . .

Dustin parks on the side of the road, near the quarry. El bursts out of the car, taking off into the woods. She can hear the boys' heavy footsteps, following close behind. She follows the slight slope of the ground, running through the trees.

They call his name in between heavy breaths, crashing through the underbrush. El loses her balance, and Mike is there, pulling her to her feet, pushing her forward. The four of them reach the edge of the tree line, continuing onto the gravel road that surrounds the edge of the cliff.

El pauses, catching her breath. Mike has a hand on her back. He, too, struggles for air. Sweat stains his brow.

El looks around, eyes sweeping across the tree line.

"He's not here." Lucas says, panting.

"Let's keep walking." Mike says. He glances at El.

"You alright?"

She nods, grimacing.

You?

"Yeah." He gives her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

They follow gravel road, jogging. Every few seconds, they call his name. Mike rubs his temple, licks his lips nervously. Lucas turns to El, his brow creased.

"You don't think-?" She looks at him, nodding solemnly. Her pace quickens. Soon, they come to the cliffside, the place where she broke Troy's arm. The place where those mouth-breathing bastards forced Mike off the edge . . .

And Will is there. El freezes, breath lodged in her throat.

Will stands at the very edge, arms held slightly away from his sides. He sways, looking unbalanced.

"Will!" Mike yells, taking a step toward him. Will whirls around, eyes darting over their faces.

"Stay away from me. . ." He snaps, wild eyes shifting from Mike's face to the edge of the cliff, and the quarry water below.

"Will, stop." Lucas says, raising his hands.

"I'm serious. Get away from me!"

"Will, calm down. You're not thinking . . ." Lucas says, voice wavering.

"Yeah, that's the problem. I've lost my mind. Just . . . stay away from me. I d-don't want to hurt you."

"Will, just . . . do something for me, alright? Step away from the edge . . ." Mike says. He approaches Will slowly, like you would a wounded animal. Will looks agonized, helpless. He's sobbing, and tears roll down his face.

"No. Don't you see? I can't b-be around y-you. It's not s-safe. And I . . . I would r-rather *die* . . ." Will trails off, stares at dark, rippling surface of the water below. "Just, l-leave me alone. You c-can't help me." He

wipes his face. "I'm sick, and I'm not gonna get better. And I'm sorry . . ."

For the first time, El can see him. For real.

He's broken. She can see him shatter, and all his pieces fall in every direction. He's fragile, and dangerous. He is dying.

Tears threaten to spill over El's lashes. Mike takes another step. He, too, is crying.

"Will." Mike says. His voice doesn't sound right. It's hollow, weak. "We can fix this. We can get through this. But I need you to get away from the edge. Please."

Will shakes his head.

"I'm sorry."

She's ready for it this time. This time, she reacts. She wills herself into the farthest corners of her own consciousness, reaching for him. She holds him in place, using her telekinesis to keep him from stepping off the edge. He's confused for a moment, staring at her with wide eyes. She reaches for breath, tripping over words.

"I can't let you jump, Will."

"Let go of me." He says, voice wavering.

She shakes her head, swallowing.

"No," she says, "I'm not gonna lose you. Not now."

And he explodes, sinks to his knees. And he's screaming. El's heart breaks for him. The sound is agonizing, full of terror and pain. Like the cry of some tortured animal.

Multiple things have shoved him into this dark corner, pushed him to this breaking point. El thinks of the PTSD, the nightmares. The pestilence. The insanity of it all . . .

Mike darts forward, grabbing Will's arms, pulling him away from the

ledge.

El rushes towards them, and Will collapses into her arms. He trembles, gasping for air. They fall to the ground, clutching each other. Dustin and Lucas rush forward, wrapping Will in a hug. Mike is sobbing, one arm around her, the other around Will.

Every ounce of strength left in her disappears, and she falls against Mike like a rag doll, barely able to keep her head up. Wordlessly, Mike takes her hand and holds fast. Will grips her wrist, whole body shaking violently. His eyes rove over her face, and tears squeeze from his eyelids, rolling down the tip of his nose. She gives him a weak smile. He exhales, closing his eyes.

"Thank you."

14. Shift

They sit on the Byers' sofa, all five of them. Mike is slumped against the pillows. El's hip is pressed against his leg, and she holds a bag of ice against his head. Dustin and Lucas exchange nervous glances. Will is pale and passive, eyes fixated, unseeing, on a point across the room. Jonathan paces in the corner, wringing his hands. An unlit cigarette dangles from Joyce's lips.

Mike leaves large gaps in their story. Particularly, Will's flight to the quarry edge. He shivers at the thought.

He's still jittery, trembling from their recent plight. And the thought of Will taking his own life, of losing his friend . . . he shoves it away, somewhere deep inside the darkest corners of his being. Will's mom doesn't need to know. It would push her right over the edge for sure.

Joyce picks up the phone with shaking fingers, glancing nervously at Will. Hopper's muffled voice floats through the receiver after the second ring.

Mike turns his attention away from their conversation. His gaze travels between the dried blood on El's face to the shadows under Will's eyes. These past few months have been painful, almost unbearably so. But this takes the damn cake.

He sighs, squeezing his eyes shut for a long moment. He feels El's hand on his shoulder, her intent gaze. Her breath tickles his cheeks.

El is not herself. She is fragile, weaker than she's been in a long time. It seems she is still a puppet, and Will is, too. Today, he tried to cut his own strings. And for the first time, she truly understands him.

Mike cannot keep his eyes away. Her body is littered with invisible scars. Scars like cracking glass. And every moment that passes he expects her to shatter.

His heart breaks for her, and his head spins. He grabs hold of her wrist, to keep himself steady. Her pulse drums, small and soft, against his fingers. He loves her, and he knows it. He'll fight to keep that

fragile life-force going until the day he dies. He'd die for her. Without hesitation. She'd do the same for him, though he would never ask her to.

And Will? God only knows what's going on inside his head . . .

Joyce sets the phone back down, licks her lips nervously. She crosses the room and perches herself on the arm of the sofa.

"Jim's on his way over . . . maybe he can help you, Will . . ." She wraps her arms around her chest, eyes fixated on her son. Will avoids her gaze.

"He can't help me." He says, bitterly.

"Maybe we can find a doctor, or . . ."

Will's face twists grotesquely. He jumps to his feet.

"Mom! Stop. Nobody can help me, and that place, the Upside Down, fucked me up. And now I'm *hurting* people. Don't you see? You can't fix this one."

Joyce recoils. There are tears in her eyes.

"Will, honey . . ."

Will pushes past her, shoves Jonathan out of the way. His heavy footfalls continue down the hall, followed by a harsh slam of his bedroom door. Everyone flinches at the noise. El shivers.

"Will!" Joyce cries, jumping to her feet. "Will, wait!" She rushes after him, and they can hear her palms beating against his door. El jumps to her feet, looking flustered, helpless. She starts to say something, but Jonathan cuts her off. He glares at them, fat tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Maybe you should go."

His voice is ragged, bitter. El draws a shuddering breath. Mike stands, leads her gently toward the door. They leave the Byers' house without another word.

. . .

Mike wakes suddenly, sitting bolt upright. He looks around the room, unsure what stirred him back to consciousness. The numbers on his alarm clock read 5:06 PM. He'd gone home and straight to his bedroom, trying to sleep off the pounding in his head and the ache in his chest.

Beside him, the Super Com hums to life.

"Mike? You there, bro?"

Mike groans, reaching for it.

"Dustin?"

"Yeah, dude. You gotta come over right now. It's the compass, man. It's fucked up. Get your ass over here. Over."

"What?"

"The compass is fucked up and you need to come over right now!" Dustin yells, not pausing for breath. Mike blows out a long sigh, rubbing his eyes.

"See you in five. Over."

He takes the stairs two at a time, swinging around the post. He comes face to face with something arguably worse than the Demogorgon: His mother.

Mike's mom blocks his path to the front door, hands on her hips, eyes flashing. He stops in his tracks, swallowing hard.

"Where have you been?"

"I was . . . out with the guys. And El." He says, averting his eyes. She's not paying attention, reaches out for him. She tilts his head back, looking at the bruises on his face.

"Mike, what happened? Are you okay?" She says, worriedly. Her face softens. Her finger caresses one of the cuts on his cheek.

"Lucas was being an ass, stuck his foot out and tripped me. I fell. I'm fine." He says, quickly. It's a bad lie, and he knows it. He meets her gaze, praying that she bought it. Thankfully, she does. She relaxes her grip, mussing his hair.

"You guys need to be more careful."

Mike exhales, reaching for the doorknob.

"Mom, I really need to go . . ."

"Go? Go where? Dinner's almost ready." Her eyebrows knit together, her hands are back on her hips.

"Dustin needs help with some project for school. It'll be super quick, I promise." Mike says, checking his watch.

"Fine. No later than six o'clock, Michael. Understand?"

He nods, fumbling with the door. He adds a quick "love you, bye!" before shutting the door behind him. He clambers into his mom's car, turning the ignition. He slams his foot on the gas, taking off down the street. Though it's only a five minute walk to Dustin's house, driving cuts the time in half. He's knocking on the door at 5:20, absentmindedly picking at a loose thread on his sleeve. Dustin throws the door open wide, ushering him inside without so much as a greeting. Lucas is waiting in Dustin's room, upstairs. He glares at Mike.

"You're late."

"Sorry. I got held up." Mike says, taking a breath. Lucas raises his eyebrows.

"My mom." He explains, rolling his eyes. Lucas chuckles.

"So guys, what's going on?"

In answer, Lucas holds up a compass. Dustin glances between Mike and Lucas, waving his arms. Mike takes the compass in his palm, making a full circle.

"It's not true North. It's been like this for over an hour, Mike." Dustin interjects, quickly.

"You don't think-?" Mike trails off, stomach twisting into a knot.

"That's exactly what I think. The Gate, it's open!"

It's happening again. Everything they so desperately tried to forget. All the monsters and the nightmares and the fucking Upside Down. It's all coming back. He can't accept it. He won't.

"We don't know that . . ."

"We can find out. Right now. Lucas, you have the wrist rocket?" Lucas nods, holding up an entire backpack. "And the shit from 'nam."

"Good. Let's go."

"Wait, you want to go to the Gate? Right now?"

"Duh." Dustin rolls his eyes. "How thick are you?"

Mike swallows.

"It's too dangerous. Honestly, that's the worst idea I've ever heard."

"What? You were the one that dragged me around looking for it, remember? And now we have the chance to find it and you don't want to go?"

Mike recoils, mulling things over in his head. They're so unprepared, and with everything that's happened to Will . . .

"Plus, it's not dangerous if we have El."

Mike freezes. The compass clatters to the floor. Blood rushes to his head.

"No. No way. Leave her out of this."

"C'mon, Mike. She's stronger now. Remember shooting practice? Remember that shit she did with Will? She wasn't even that tired!"

"No! This is completely different! She's still pretty weak, guys. She's weak because of what's happening with Will. It's like just being near him makes her have flashbacks or whatever. Plus, this is the *Gate* we're talking about. This is the Upside Down! I'm not losing her in that place. Not again." Mike voice rises with every word, until he finds himself shouting.

Memories flash before his eyes. The thought of El laying down her life to protect them those many years ago, the image of her disappearing from his life into a million pieces . . . it's all haunted him for years now. It's all painfully fresh in his mind. He's not going to let it happen again. He's not going to lose her.

Dustin holds up his hands, palms out, as if surrendering. Lucas puts a hand on Mike's shoulder.

"Okay. Alright, that's fine. We go without El. Just to see where it is, so we can be prepared."

Mike bites his lip. His head throbs, painfully. And then there's that promise he gave El, that promise that he wouldn't do anything stupid . . .

He looks at his friends, then at the floor. They've made up their minds already.

"Tomorrow."

"What?" Lucas groans, clearly annoyed.

"We'll find the gate tomorrow. That way, it'll be lighter outside. We'll have more time."

Dustin bites his lip. Lucas just rolls his eyes.

"Don't you think we should tell Hopper?" Mike says, looking at them. "I mean, he's kind of a badass, and he's on our side. He knows about Will."

Dustin sighs, still staring at the compass.

"Yeah. I do. Let's tell him."

Mike nods.

"Good. If we're gonna help Will, we're gonna do it right. I'm done running around like a goblin with an intelligence score of zero."

Lucas stifles a small laugh, looking at Mike. He nods.

"I guess you're right."

. . .

"El?"

"Mike." She greets him, voice framed by faint static. He lies on his bed, Super Com resting on his chest. He smiles into his pillow.

"Hey. How're you doing?"

"Okay." She says. She pauses. "I'm okay. I just . . . I keep thinking about what happened . . ." She chokes, voice wavering. The familiar ache in his chest returns, and he wishes they were together, right now. He wishes there wasn't so much space between them. It's something that crosses his mind all too often.

"I know. I know . . ."

"There's something I need to tell you. But I think you probably already know. The Gate . . . it's open." He says, holding his breath. He can hear her exhale, sharp and strained. When she speaks, her voice is a mere whisper.

"I know. I feel it. It's just like Before."

On the other end, El bursts into tears. He bites his lip, her fear a thousand times magnified inside his own head. Her emotions are overwhelming. It's hard to breathe. Mike feels as if his head is being held under water. He struggles to draw a breath. The sound of her sobs causes him physical pain.

"Don't cry. It's gonna be okay. Hopper's gonna go with us, tomorrow. We're going to go find it."

"What?"

"We're gonna go find the Gate. I figure, if we know where it is, I don't know . . . we can stop all the bad things from happening."

"No. Mike, don't go there. It's not safe. There are monsters . . . don't go. Please, don't go."

"El . . ."

"Mike. I'm serious. You won't be able to stop anything from coming through that gate. Okay? Mike, please don't . . ."

She's crying even harder, words punctuated by gasping, choking sobs. He breaks.

"I won't go. We won't go. We'll figure something out."

There's a long pause, a lot of static. Mike's head spins. .

"Promise?"

"Promise."

His head spins. Real fear presses in on him, dimming all other thoughts. The only things that exist . . . El's tortured crying and that goddamned Gate. Haven't they been through enough?

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"It has to be me."

"What?"

"I have to be the one to seal it. I have to close the Gate before anybody gets hurt."

Mike's stomach drops. He sits up, gripping the Super Com so tightly his knuckles turn white.

"You'll get hurt. It doesn't have to be you . . . There must be another

way . . ."

"No." Her voice is small.

"El, if you think I'm going to sit back and let you fight this alone, you are dead wrong." His voice wavers, breaks on the last word.

His eyes itch, and tears spring behind them. Suddenly, he's angry. He's yelling.

"No. You've done enough. You've risked your life for us more than once. I'd rather die before I let you go back to that hell hole." He pauses, breathing hard. "El, I'm not going to lose you again."

His falls silent, swallowing the lump in his throat.

He reaches to find a distraction, a story to take them far away from the hell that is their reality. But he can't. For once in his life, he doesn't have a story to tell. And he's crying, which makes El cry even harder. And all he can think is that their lives are so fucked up and he loves her and he'd do anything to take all her pain away and he'd give anything for them to be normal teenagers . . .

"El?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you open it?"

She inhales, sharply.

"No." She sniffs. "Will did."

. . .

El sits cross legged on her bed, holding the Super Com, which has long fallen silent. She wants to hear his voice. She wants him to keep talking with her, but she knows he has fallen asleep and she should be happy, glad he's getting a little bit of rest for once. She can't calm her mind, and for her, sleep isn't even in the question. Not right now.

The Gate is open.

She knows. She knows Will opened it. The emotional trauma, the gravity of the situation, they are all contributors. Something inside him snapped.

The moment he broke, fell to his knees, the sky split in two.

Part of it is her fault. She can't even begin to understand what's happening to him. The whole thing, this nightmarish reality, it threatens to consume her.

She was supposed to find the Gate before anyone else did. She was supposed to close it before anybody in Hawkins got wind of the darkness inside that place... that's why she went looking for it in the first place. But now it's really open and Mike knows about it and Dustin and Lucas know about it....

She rubs her eyes, staring at the walkie talkie in her lap. She'll have to be the one to close it. There's no other way. If she can find a way to close it-soon-maybe she can save people.

She can save Mike.

. . .

Mike sits up, squints in the darkness. His body aches, and his heartbeat throbs in his head.

There's a faint *thud* outside. He watches, perplexed, as the window slides open, seemingly off its own accord. El appears outside, draped in shadow, fingers gripping the windowsill. She climbs through it, sock feet hitting the carpet soundlessly. She is the spaces between the stars and the shadows that dance in the far reaches of a deserted street. She moves fluidly, like a cat or some other-worldly being, which she kind of is. In a way.

She wears darkness like a cloak and her eyes are like glass.

"What're you-" Mike stammers. She shakes her head, tapping her lips. She tiptoes over to his bedside.

"Scoot over."

He does, and she climbs into his bed, knees tucked up to her chest. She's wearing sweatpants and a plain, black tank-top. Her hair is messy, pulled up in a loose bun. Mike swallows, suddenly breathless.

"I couldn't sleep." She says, before he can ask for an explanation. She leans into him, taking a deep breath. He wraps an arm around her shoulders. It's an involuntary action. Instinctive, like breathing.

He's glad she's here. He's glad she's still asking for his company, his comfort. He swears one of these days she's going to stop needing him. She's going to decide he's not good enough. And he doesn't blame her because God only knows what makes her think he's so special.

He only is certain that he loves her, and for now, that's good enough.

"Do you want to talk about it? About . . ." Mike bites his lip. "The Gate?" He feels her body stiffen and immediately regrets bringing it up. He meets her gaze. She blinks, slowly. Her face relaxes, somewhat. She gives him a small, forced smile.

"No. I just want to sleep." She says. And he realizes that's the best idea he's ever heard. Even in the most innocent sense.

"Okay." He says. She leans back, head on his pillow, facing him. He's propped up on one elbow, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She's doesn't close her eyes, she just looks at him. Intently, like she's attempting to commit every freckle to memory. She's quiet, and she is so close that their breath mixes and the air around them is warm and whole and it feels *good*. His heart is beating so loudly he's sure everyone within a ten mile radius can hear it.

"El, if my mom finds you here she's going to have a cow. And a horse, and a pig and a goat. I'll be grounded for a month." Even as he says it, he feels stupid, wills himself to stop talking. Because there's a girl in his bed and he should definitely stop making a gigantic ass hat out of himself . . .

"Shut up, Mike. I'm sleeping." She says. She closes her eyes, then. And he forces himself not to think about the Gate. He forces himself to shove the last couple months into a deep, dark corner of his brain. He forces himself not to think about Will or the Upside Down.

He focuses on El, who is currently in his bed and barely a few inches away. And he lies there, listening to her breathing, knowing that if that continuous inhale and exhalation of air ever stopped that it would be as if his own lungs stopped working. Knowing that if that single word, *promise*, which is defined solely by El and the beating of her heart and the sound of her laugh . . . if that promise ever broke then the world would shatter.

He can't think about that, either.

So Mike closes his eyes, and her hand finds his hand and holds fast.

. . .

She leaves in the early morning, kisses him goodbye.

"See you soon." He says, staring at her. She nods, solemnly. She goes, and he's left with a sick feeling in his stomach and the strange desire to call her back. To beg her to stay a little longer. But he doesn't, and he'll regret it. He's sure.

He can't go back to sleep. Not now.

It's Saturday. March 28, 1987. The first day of their Spring Break. The clock reads 6:47 AM. He lies in bed for a while, watching the sun's ascent. It drags him into the day. After a while, he can't make himself sit still. He goes downstairs, flicks on the T.V. He watches cartoons for a while, mind wandering elsewhere.

"You're up early."

His mom appears in the doorway, carrying two cups of coffee. She offers him a mug. He accepts it, gratefully. His mom settles beside him on the couch, slender fingers wrapped around her own mug. He takes small sips, trying to ignore the bitter taste. It could do with a couple sugar cubes . . .

El likes coffee. A lot. She always adds exactly three sugar cubes. He was used to drinking coffee black, until she got him in the habit of adding sugar, too.

Mrs. Wheeler watches her son intently, eyebrows slightly knit.

"How're you doing, Honey?" She says, gently.

"Alright." He forces a small smile.

He wonders how much she knows, about Will and everything. She certainly knows some things. She knows about what happened at the Snow Ball, but that was back in January . . .

"You can talk to me." She says, quickly. He looks at her, biting his lip. She reminds him often. He can see a sort of desperation in her eyes. He's suddenly guilty.

"I'm okay, Mom. Honest. It's just been tough, with Will. He's still pretty sick. The Upside Down messed him up pretty good."

His mom puts an arm around his shoulders, eyes softening. It's been awhile since they'd actually talked. It feels . . . kind of nice.

"Oh, Mike. I know. It's hard. I'm here for you, okay?"

Mike nods, raising the mug to his lips.

On the T.V., the channels drift and static interrupts the audio at random intervals. Beside him, the living room lantern flickers once. Twice. He stares at it, and the sick feeling in his gut returns.

He can feel the threshold shift.

The Gate is open.

15. The Palace

Dustin and Lucas grudgingly agree to abstain from looking for the Gate, much to El's relief.

She's quiet and withdrawn all weekend. And while there's static-filled radio stations and messed up compasses and the occasional electricity problem, nothing is majorly of place. That is, except for Will.

When they go to the Byers' to check up on him, Jonathan answers the door. He tells them that he went through another one of his slug attacks on Sunday morning, that he went mad. He doesn't go into much detail, leaving their imaginations to run wild with awful visions of their friend's affliction. The oldest Byers boy shoots a solemn look at the four of them. Dark circles stain the skin underneath his eyes. El bites back the cold, sinking feeling that settles in her gut.

Jonathan sends them away, promising to have Will call them later. They never receive that call.

On Tuesday, Dustin suggests they go to the Palace, the arcade downtown, for a distraction.

"To take our minds off all the bullshit going on," or so he puts it. Mike, Lucas, and El agree enthusiastically. And by some miracle, Will joins them.

Mike drives, and El sits in the passenger seat. She fiddles with the radio, which is useless because it cuts between channels, and because of all the static. She realizes this and shuts it off, trying not to think about all the implications. Trying not to think about the Upside Down.

They get out of the car. Mike offers El his hand. She takes it, interlacing her fingers with his. She leans in to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. Will, extraordinarily, is smiling. Actually *smiling*.

Upon their arrival, Dustin makes a mad dash to the food counter. Will and Lucas laugh, following close behind. Mike buys a Coca-Cola

for himself and a bag of Pop Rocks for El. Her eyes light up, and she snags the bag from his hands, immediately pouring some into her mouth.

They join the others at a table in the corner. Mike watches Dustin devour not one, not two, but *three* hot dogs over the course of five minutes.

"That's gotta be setting some kind of record." He says, smirking. Dustin wipes the mustard off his lips and makes a rude gesture, to which Mike's only response is laughter. El giggles, and Lucas just shakes his head.

"Remind me again . . . why do I hang out with you people?"

"Because we're all you've got, and you know it!" Dustin yells, wrestling Lucas into a choke hold. El and Mike laugh even harder, and Will is grinning.

Dustin and Mike start to play Pac-Man and Frogger. Will watches. Lucas challenges El to some Air Hockey. For a couple hours, life returns to normal. And it feels good.

And then this happens:

Will freezes. His hand tightens around the joystick, but he doesn't move it. His hands are still. He loses his game, and the screen fades to black. Mike is the first to notice. His stomach sinks.

"Will, are you-?" He's cut off as Will collapses into a heap on the carpeted floor of the Palace. Mike darts over to his friend's side, abandoning Donkey Kong.

"Will!"

El, Dustin, and Lucas realize what's going on, follow Mike. Will's body is convulsing. And the whole thing is so familiar and scary. Mike acts quickly. He moves to pin Will's arms to the ground. Will twitches, moans. Slugs dribble out of his mouth. Mike pushes him onto his side, making sure he doesn't choke. Will coughs, his body shuddering. Mike keeps holding his arms, watching as his friend's skin dissolves and turns gray.

It's a different kind of horror. It's numb, it's knowing no matter what he does he can't stop whatever is happening to his friend. The pestilence inside him knows no boundaries.

Will does not exist, only a monster.

His limbs lengthen, his face grows thinner. It jogs El's memory of the monsters in Mike's campaigns. It's not the Demogorgon, but something similar . . .

Dustin and Lucas rush forward, trying to help Mike hold him down. El shrinks away, because the demons and the monsters are all around them, waltzing through the shadows. They're laughing, and wrapping her up in puppet strings. The Upside Down, darkness, it's all so near. She can feel it in the air, thickening, making it hard to breathe or think or move.

The slugs make a slow procession across the floor of the arcade, and El can hear someone screaming and vaguely wonders if it's her own voice that pierces the vacuum of silence weighing down on her. She smells blood.

Around them, people are becoming aware of the Will, or the monster that has sprung from his body. Kids are screaming, running in every direction. Women shriek, reaching for their children or shrinking away in fright. One of the Palace employees is running towards the phone on the wall, white as a sheet. The ceiling lights flash, the game screens flicker and fade to blackness.

Mike's face is twisted into a sort of grimace, trying to keep his grip on the slick, gray skin and the skeletal body beneath it. But its strength becomes too great. Monster-Will reaches out, shoves Mike against the Pac-Man machine. Lucas yells, throws himself at the beast. There's a terrible shriek and odd whistling as the monster turns to face its newest threat. It throws its weight onto Lucas, and the boy collapses under it. Its claws reach for Lucas' body.

"No!" El screams. Monster-Will is lifted off the ground. It towers above her, screaming and hissing. She thrusts it through the glass doors of the Palace. All around them, people are screaming. Glass flies in all directions. The shards freeze in midair as El stops the glass

from raining down on the crowd. And then it all tumbles to the ground, harmlessly. El sways, feels the ground rippling under her feet. The lights flicker weakly and shut off, bathing them all in semi-darkness.

Mike leaps to his feet, catching her as she falls. She stumbles into his arms. Sirens sound in the distance. Dustin and Lucas rush forward, leaping through the shattered glass doors.

"El, El, are you okay?" He says, brushing the hair from her forehead. His fingers caress her cheeks and come away slick with the blood currently leaking out of her ears. Her tongue gets in the way of her words. Fuzzy, black spots interrupt the scope of her vision. She doesn't answer, only attempts to regain her balance. She makes her way towards the broken glass and broken doors. Mike protests, but she ignores him.

Dustin and Lucas stand just outside the sea of shattered glass, calling Will's name. He is nowhere in sight.

El is breathing fast. And she can't calm herself down and her head is spinning so much that she can barely focus on any one thing. Mike looks frightened, pale. He's watching her like she's about to disappear, too. She knows something they don't.

She looks out of the window. Will, now returning to himself, makes a beeline across the street. He's running towards the Gate. She doesn't know how she knows this. She just does.

She steps toward Dustin, reaching into his jacket pocket, searching for his car keys. He grabs her wrist.

"El, what are you . . ." He trails off as she wrenches her arm away, stepping back. El starts to cry, gripping the keys so tightly that they cut into the palm of her hand. She looks at Mike, tears streaming down her face.

"I-I'm sorry."

She turns on her heel, sprinting for Dustin's car. She throws open the door and climbs into the driver's seat, starting the ignition.

"El, wait!" Mike yells, running towards the car. She grips the steering wheel with both hands, whipping out of the parking lot. She catches sight of Hopper's car, followed closely by an ambulance, in her rearview mirror. She pulls onto the road, slamming her foot down on the gas. She has to get to the Gate before he does, she has to stop him . . .

She's driving fast. Recklessly. She runs two red lights. A pickup truck pulls out in front of her. She slams on the brakes, giving the car an extra, telekinetic push as she swerves, missing the truck by mere inches.

Blood runs down her upper lip, stains her teeth. She wipes it away with the back of her hand. She's crying uncontrollably now, and her breath catches in her throat. It's the ugly, panicky type of crying. The kind you can't stop.

El is heading straight for the Gate. It's where it used to be. It has reopened, nestled deep inside the corpse of Hawkins National Laboratory. Some innate sense, some thin trail in her consciousness, is leading her toward it . . .

She makes a sharp turn, off of the main road, and speeds straight past her house. Dirty looks and honking horns assault her from all sides, but she doesn't really care.

El reaches the edge of the woods, jerks the wheel. The car rolls over to the side of the road. She throws open the driver's side door, wastes no time before she's tearing off into the trees.

El can hear Will 's footsteps ahead of her, which is insane. She can't fathom how he managed to get here, across town, so fast. Then again, you can't just drive a straight line through town. But someone can cut through town on foot pretty fast, especially if you're running. Especially if the world is collapsing in on itself.

She struggles to catch up. She's still crying, much to her frustration. Eventually, she catches sight of him as he slows his pace enough to duck through the hole she made in the fence.

"Will!" She calls, choking on her tears. He turns, catches sight of her.

Something shifts in his expression, his panic eases for a moment. The terror in his eyes disappears for a moment, replaced by sorrow. Pain. He gives his head a little shake, then turns on his heel.

She scrambles through the hole in the fence right after him. One of the loose wires in the chainlink digs into the skin above her collarbone. She stifles a cry of pain, hand immediately finding its way to the three inch gash in her skin. Blood leaks from the wound, leaving a scarlet stain the collar of her shirt.

This small hindrance has given Will an opportunity to put a couple more yards between them. She curses under her breath, using vocabulary that would put Lucas to shame.

She regains her pace, hand pressed against the cut. Will sprints across the cement pathway and sprints to one of the buildings. Several of the windows are smashed in, probably from some kids fooling around. She hopes. She has to remind herself that those windows were broken when she came, back in January . . .

Will climbs through the window, ignoring the shards of glass sticking up like teeth. She follows close behind, breathe lodging inside her throat.

She braves the gaping maw of broken glass. She ignores the bad memories that surround this place. She climbs in after him.

. . .

Mike, Dustin, and Lucas sit in Hopper's car. The sirens wail. Hopper looks sort of crazed, teeth clamped around an unlit cigarette. He's white-knuckling the steering wheel, all the while talking quickly into his radio.

"Fuck." He growls, fiddling with the device as it inexplicably switches channels for the fourth time in just a few minutes. He turns to Mike, who sits in the passenger seat.

"Tell me again."

Mike swallows.

"Will had another one of his attacks in the arcade. He attacked Lucas. Hopper, he wasn't even Will anymore. He was a monster!" Mike yells, breathing heavily. He runs his hand through his hair, something he does when he's frustrated or stressed out. Hopper holds up his hand.

"Okay. Alright, just keep talking. What happened after he attacked Lucas?"

"El through him through the front doors. All the glass broke. And she was really weak after . . . Anyway, we got outside and Will just took off. He ran. And El looked bad. Really bad." Mike swallows hard, falls silent.

Lucas nods.

"Yeah, it was scary. She was bleeding from her ears like she used to. I thought she got stronger, she hasn't done that in a long time." He cuts in. Mike nods.

"She's sick."

"She stole my car." Dustin adds. Hopper shakes his head.

"That kid, I swear . . ."

Mike is quiet for a long moment. When he speaks, his voice is quiet and hollow. Barely whisper.

"She's going to the Gate."

"What? How do you know?" Lucas says, looking perplexed.

"I just know."

"So, where is it?"

"It's in the lab." Hopper says, quietly. He looks at the three of them, then shakes his head. "You kids aren't the only ones dealing with this, you know. Honestly, it'd be lot easier if you just told me everything. That way I can help you."

"Yeah, but then you wouldn't let us do anything . . ." Dustin mumbles.

Hopper chuckles, glancing at Dustin.

"That's probably true."

Hopper pulls up alongside Dustin's car a few minutes later, at the edge of the woods.

"El?" Mike calls, getting out of the Chief's car.

"She's not here." Hopper says, looking around. Mike exhales, pinching the bridge of his nose. Lucas pats him on the shoulder.

"She'll be okay, man."

Mike just looks at him, shrugging his shoulders. He looks really pale, twisting his hands nervously into the hem of his shirt.

"El!" He yells, a note of desperation evident in his voice. He receives only empty silence in return.

"We need to look for her." Nobody objects. He continues, farther into the woods. Lucas, having been there before, leads them to the chainlink fence that surrounds Hawkins National Laboratory. Mike gazes at the building and shivers.

This was her prison. This is where she was held captive and raised like an animal for twelve years of her life. He shoves that familiar, intense anger into some unreachable part himself, trying not let it consume him. It doesn't work like he'd hoped. He's still seeing red.

Mike is the first to climb through the hole in the fence, followed closely by the others. They make their way across the grounds, reaching the concrete pathway that leads to the main building.

"Look." Lucas says, pointing to the ground. Mike's heart sinks. There are faint traces of blood on the concrete.

"That's fresh. Somebody's been here." Hopper says.

"We should try to get into the building." Mike says.

"You don't think El is hurt, do you?" Dustin says, quietly. Mike bites

his lip, and his heart jumps into his throat. He starts to panic.

"It's probably from her nose." Lucas says, trying to reassure him. Mike nods.

"We need to hurry." He says, looking at Hopper. The Chief nods, leads the way to one of the side entrances. It's locked. The Chief grabs a rock from over by the fence and strikes it against the knob. The lock snaps. Mike takes a step back, surprised.

Hopper takes the pistol from his belt, pushes a flashlight into Mike's hands. The metal is cold against his hands, and the beam is strong.

Everything is coated in a thick layer of dust. Cobwebs gather in every corner and crevice. Mike shivers.

They continue down the hallway, walking fast. Hopper pauses every so often, trying to remember his way around. Eventually, they come to an elevator. Hopper presses the button, but nothing happens. Everything is eerily silent. A loud, grating kind of silent.

"There's gotta be some stairs around here . . ." Mike points the flashlight around, looking for a sign or a door. To the left, there is a heavy metal door. Hopper tests the lock, finds it unlocked. It leads them to a narrow stairway. Hopper leads the way, pistol in hand. Everyone is holding their breath.

Mike's gaze travels to his friends' weary faces. His mind races. El is somewhere down here, in the place that features in her nightmares. In her prison.

The stairway leads into a dark, narrow hallway. Here, little white particles float in the air, like ash. Like snowflakes. Mike reaches out to touch one, gazing at it curiously. Hopper grabs his arm, shaking his head. Mike shoots a skeptical look at the Chief, brow lifting.

"That stuff's probably toxic." Hopper says, letting go of Mike's arm.

"What is it?"

"No idea."

The next room they encounter has a closet full of dusty, white hazmat suits. Hopper takes one of them off its hanger, brandishing it in the air.

"Put this on. If it is toxic, we should have protection." Hopper says, gruffly. Mike opens his mouth to protest, but closes it again. The Chief glares at him, pushes the suit roughly into his hands. Mike steps into it, shifting uncomfortably. The suit is too tight, in all the wrong places. It's meant for somebody considerably shorter than him. Lucas grins.

"That's a nice look." Mike blushes, rolling his eyes.

"Shut up."

Mike puts the helmet on, too, and immediately dislikes the feeling. His breath creates a steamy film over the glass. He feels like he can't get enough air. His heartbeat hammers in his head, seemingly amplified by the bulky helmet.

Dustin and Lucas each dress in the suits, tugging at their collars and sleeves unhappily. Hopper taps his toe, obviously impatient.

After everyone is suited up, they continue on. Hopper leads the way into a large room. They pass a large, empty tank. The Chief points to it, mumbling something that Mike doesn't quite catch. He has an idea of what they are, though. El's told him about it before, on nights where the nightmares were particularly bad and she found that talking about it helped a little. Yeah, Mike knows exactly what these are.

It's a bath. A sensory deprivation tank.

He feels his stomach twist, imagining El trapped in there. His temper rises, and blood rushes to his cheeks. He imagines the darkness, the water pressing in on all sides . . .

He imagines El, screaming while the scientists outside ignore her terror just so they can jot down one more note on their clipboards . . .

Mike grits his teeth, forcing himself to take a breath. He's so angry. And there will always be some part of him that is defined by rage.

Rage for what they did to her. Hatred for the people that tortured her and brainwashed her and justified it by calling it research.

"Be quiet." Hopper says, suddenly, Mike stops in his tracks, listening. Muffled voices filter from the other side of the door just ahead of them.

"El? Will?" Mike calls, pace quickening. He sprints, throws open the door. He meets El's gaze, across the room. She stands still, just a couple feet away from a massive . . . *something*. Thick, ropy vines and slimy plant matter protrude from a gigantic, pulsing hole. It's glowing slightly. It looks almost like it's a living creature, moving as if it's breathing.

The Gate.

"El!" He yells, ripping off his helmet. She's crying, and the tears on her cheeks mix with the dried bloodstains around her nose and ears. Her skin is deathly pale, bruised-looking and shadowed.

Mike's heart leaps into his throat. She looks like she did back in '83, in the few moments before she shattered into a million pieces. Before she was stolen from his life for three unbearable months.

He's reliving it, just like he does in his nightmares. But this is real.

There's a loud ringing in his ears. He runs toward her, trying to anticipate her next move. He's not going to let it happen again. He's not going to lose her.

An invisible force slams into his chest, knocking his back several feet. He cries out in surprise, feeling all the oxygen leave his lungs. He coughs, eyes watering. El is trembling, her gaze shifting from the Gate to Mike and back again.

"El, what are you doing?" He shouts, trying to regain his balance. She doesn't release her grasp on him, keeps him pinned against the wall.

"Will is in there." She points a trembling finger at the Gate. "He's in the Upside Down." Her voice is a ghost. She swallows, gazing at him. Her eyes scare him the most. They are tortured, full of pain.

"We can save him. But I need you to let me go, El. Please. Get away from the Gate. You don't have to do this." He speaks to her like you would a wounded animal, like he speaks to Will during one of his episodes. His words are measured, careful. But he's crying, and it's getting harder to control his terror with each passing second. She shifts her weight, body rigid. Her face is marred by an agonized grimace. His time is running out.

"Don't leave me, El."

She swallows, gaze reaching across the room. Her eyes caress his face, memorizing it, taking it in. Her tears are falling thicker and faster than ever.

"I'm sorry, Mike."

She turns away from him, steps toward the Gate. Her fingers reach out, brushing the slimy membrane. It shifts, the hole widens. It awaits her like the jaws of some gigantic creature.

Mike can't hear correctly, can barely see through his tears. He's powerless. He is forced to watch as she is swallowed by the rift and torn from his grasp, yet again.

16. The Definition of Heartbreak

Mike falls forward, and his palms slam into the floor. The ringing in his ears is shrill and loud, and his thoughts are muddled. He lifts his head, watching numbly as the plant matter shifts and rebuilds itself, sealing the hole. It stops glowing, stops moving.

"El!"

Mike leaps to his feet, launching himself toward the rift in the wall. Dustin springs forward, grabbing Mike's wrist.

"Mike!" He yells, holding his friend back. "Mike, wait-" Mike wrenches his arm away. He sprints toward the place where El stood, just seconds ago. He runs his hands along the vines, searching for an opening, a way in. He refuses

"No." He moans, fingernails tearing at the mossy tendrils. He throws himself against the wall, and his shoulder collides painfully with the hard surface. He does it again and again, beating his body against the wall, because he cannot accept it. El is gone, and the rift has sealed between them.

"El. El! No . . . El . . . "

A rough hand grabs a fistful of his shirt, yanking him backwards. He loses his balance, knocked on his side. He lands at a bad angle, and his hip takes the brunt of the fall.

Hopper stands above him, face ashen. The pistol dangles loosely from his grip. The Chief's lip curls, and his eyes flash. Mike's breath sticks in his throat.

"What do you think you're doing?" The older man growls, keeping a hand on Mike's shoulder. Mike struggles against his grip.

"We need to go after them. I need to get to her . . ." He says, words jumbling together as he fights for breath.

"You're not going after anybody. I don't need another kid stuck in that place, Wheeler. You hear me?"

"I CAN'T LOSE HER!" Mike screams, agonized. Hopper is taken aback by the outburst. The Chief takes a step backward, holding up his hands. Mike's chest heaves, fighting for breath. His eyes are red, his face flushed. His gaze travels from Hopper to Dustin and Lucas' weary, tear-streaked faces.

Mike sinks to his knees. Something inside him snaps, like a flicked switch or a pin drop into the void. He breaks down. The tears come thick and fast. His shoulders shake as heavy, painful sobs wrack his body. There is a terrible ache in his chest. His face is hot, and it's hard to breathe.

"El. El. El . . ." He repeats her name, saying it like some sort of prayer. Because somewhere in his deranged, delusional mind he wants to believe that if he says it enough, she'll appear out of thin air.

He covers his face with his hands, not knowing what to do. He's useless. Will's in there. El's in there . . . He already lost her twice, and he promised himself he wouldn't lose her again. Ever. And now he's broken that promise. He let her go back into that place and now she could be lost or hurt or worse . . .

It takes a long time to calm him down. He doesn't know how long. It feels like years. Eventually, his violent sobs fade into occasional sniffles. He mops his face with the sleeve of the hazmat suit, hiccuping. Dustin and Lucas sit beside him. They don't speak. They don't need to.

Mike watches helplessly, still gasping for air, as Hopper tests the wall for weakness. It's futile. The Gate is sealed. The tendrils of alien plant matter remain, but the opening is no longer accessible.

Still, Hopper doesn't stop. He, too, looks like he's nearing some sort of breakdown. He runs frantically along the wall, yelling and cursing. Eventually, he makes a call to the police station. Mike can hear Flo's weary voice over the radio. He stares straight ahead, ignoring the throbbing in his temple. He lets the terrible, physical ache in his chest obliterate everything else.

He is the definition of heartbreak. Anybody looking at him can see it.

Eventually, other officers arrive on the scene. Hopper hides behind a mask, stoic and unyielding. Dustin and Lucas wipe the tears from their cheeks and stand, ready to leave. Ready to find another way to get their friends back. Mike is silent, unresponsive. It takes a lot of convincing, begging, for him to finally accept defeat. He drags himself to his feet, not really thinking. Not really feeling anything.

Hopper stops him, puts a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm going to find them."

Mike doesn't meet the Chief's gaze.

He tries to focus on putting one foot in front of the other, which is hard because the room seems to be spinning. Somehow, he makes it outside.

A couple police cars are parked along the side of the road, lights flashing.

Dustin drives home. Mike stares at his hands, unwilling and unable to say anything. The silence between them is heavy, almost suffocating.

"We're going to find them." Lucas says, hollowly. His voice is ragged. He looks at Mike, puts a hand on his shoulder.

"We're going to get them back."

...

His mother attacks him before he has a chance to make it fully into the house.

"Where were you? What's going on? Mike, I got a call from the Chief."
.."

He shakes his head, holding up a hand to stop her. She falls silent at the look on his face.

"Mike-."

He doesn't have much left in him. He's cried himself out already. And

he can tell she's worried about him, that she wants him to talk, to let her help . . .

He gives his mom a brief hug, a reassuring squeeze. When he steps back, she looks confused. Afraid.

"Mike, talk to me."

He sighs. His lip trembles.

"It's El. She . . . she went back to the Upside Down. That place, you know, where Will was? And Will's in there too. She went to save Will . . ." He trails off, staring at his Chuck Taylors. He waits for tears, but they do not come. Only the terrible pain in his chest and the hollowness. The empty feeling that he hates so much.

"I don't know where she is. I don't know how I'm gonna get her back . . ."

"Honey . . ." Mrs. Wheeler steps forward, hugging her son a second time. He realizes she's crying, which only makes him want to cry even more. He swallows the lump in his throat as her arms tighten around him, holding him close, as if he were still a little kid crying over the names that Troy and his friends used to call him

Mike lets it go on for a while. It actually feels . . . nice.

"My baby . . . my p-poor b-baby. Can I do anything? I better g-give Becky a c-call." She says, choking back tears.

"Mom, I think I'm going to go upstairs." He says, quietly. Because she doesn't get it. All he really wants is to be alone for a while. She steps back, holding him at arm's length.

"Oh, yes. Of course. Tell me if you need anything . . ."

He forces a smile, gives her hand a reassuring squeeze. He his way up to his room. grabbing the Super Com from his bedside table. He sits on the floor, pulling his knees close to his chest. .

Here, away from everything, he can be sure of her presence. She's with him, mentally. It makes him feel a little better.

He moves the dial absentmindedly, knowing the channel won't really matter. Knowing she can reach him even if the damn thing isn't turned on.

"El?" He says, quietly. He conveys her name through the mental threads they share. No answer. Only static. He's had enough goddamn static for a lifetime.

"El!" Louder this time. Forcefully. The static lapses for a moment. He grows hopeful.

"Mike?"

Definitely her voice. He almost laughs out loud, he's so relieved. A grin molds itself into his tear-stained face.

"El!" He clutches the walkie close to his chest, as if it were El's life in his hands. His fingers shake so violently he has trouble keeping a good grip on the device.

"Mike . . ." Her voice cuts off, sharply. The static resumes. His smile vanishes.

"El? El, talk to me . . ." Static. Literal radio silence. It's heavy. "Damnit!" He resists the urge to chuck the Super Com across the room. He bites his lip, fingernails scraping against the insides of his arms to ground himself as the world is once again ripped out from under him.

It's tantalizing. Torturous. Once again, she dances just out of his reach. He can salvage small words, a ghost of her presence, but not much more. It's happened before and it's happening again. And he's useless.

"El." The name slips from his lips once again, a weak whisper. A prayer. A plea.

And the answer?

Static.

. . .

That night, he calls Nancy, tells her everything. She starts to cry. He can hear her strangled sobs through the phone. He can't bring himself to offer her any comfort. He is numb.

She offers to come home, to help, but he declines. Already, he's distancing himself from her. She pleads with him, choking on tears, but he hangs up the phone before he starts to cry, too. Right now, he must be strong.

For El.

17. Catch You on the Flipside

REPOST I apologize, there was an error uploading this chapter.

El turns, slowly making a complete circle. The damp air is cold and heavy upon her shoulders. She squints in the semi-darkness. She's still standing in the lab, but it's different now. Dark and damp and covered in vines.

She is standing in the Upside Down. Again.

"Will?" Even her own voice sounds different, distant. She mops her face with the back of her hand and takes a couple steps forward. She can hear him, not far ahead. Running. His footsteps are loud in such a desolate place. Everything echoes.

She's still weak from straining her abilities, and the world seems to be careening out of control. Her brain is foggy, her muscles leaden.

El stops after a couple yards, slumping against one of the water tanks. El lets the dizziness overcome her for a moment, waiting for the sick feeling to fade. It does, after a minute or two. She straightens, gaze sweeping across the room. Everything is covered in gooey moss. Everything looks toxic, repulsive.

The cut along her collarbone still oozes blood. She wipes it away, hastily, knowing all too well what would become of them if something catches scent of it . . .

El continues on, trying to avoid touching anything with her bare skin. She follows the sound Will's footsteps, though she is unable to see him. It's so dark . . .

It's all too familiar. El spent three months here, alone and weak. She's returned in nightmares, in subconscious wanderings. And now she's back. El's convinced this twisted universe has it out for her. There's a fault in her stars, she's sure. What the hell did she do to deserve this? Her current predicament makes her want to cry or scream or both.

She draws a strangled breath, attempting to pull herself together. If there's a time to be strong, it's now. She has to save Will and get them both out of this wretched place.

Terrible visions surge to the surface of her mind, threatening to consume her. El digs her fingernails into the skin on her forearm, swallowing the scream building in the back of her throat. She continues taking careful, measured breaths, once again hearing Hopper's gentle voice.

Just breathe.

In and out.

In. Out.

El starts to jog, down the narrow hallway. The tears have stopped, but a cold fear settles in her gut. Her thoughts are loud, like a sort of buzzing that fills her ears and interrupts her other senses.

Mike's mind is distant, and she resists the urge to cut the connection. She knows it would push him over the edge to withdraw the only means of contact they have. Still, whatever she experiences here, it could have an effect on him. It could draw him here . . .

She shoves the thought away, refocusing her attention on the task at hand. She keeps an eye on her surroundings, constantly checking over her shoulder for any sign of danger or threat. She climbs the stairs, finding her way out of an unlocked door.

Outside is not much better, dismal and empty. The area is surrounded by trees and creeping, other-worldly plants. The concrete under her feet is mossy and damp, the air is dense and cold.

"Will!" She's lost track of him now, and his footsteps are muffled by the thick expanse of trees and the mossy plants underfoot. She takes off running, tumbling through the hole in the chain link fence. She goes crashing through the thick foliage, peripheral vision tricking her into seeing shadows behind every tree . . .

"Will!"

. . .

Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Jonathan stand in the Byers' old shed. It's Monday. El and Will disappeared yesterday, Sunday. It is also Spring Break. Mike is glad for the break from school. That way, he can focus his entire energy on getting her back. He thinks of the halls, empty and dismal without El. He shivers. Everything is so much harder to face without her.

Jonathan, weary and exhausted, stands with a cold resolve. His eyes are red, his shoulders stooped with the weight of everything that's happened. He holds an old wooden bat with nails driven through it. Mike gazes at the weapon. It's covered in a strange, black residue. He shivers.

They'd fought the Demogorgon with it, back in '83. At least, that's what Nancy told him.

Mike keeps his eyes fixated on the bat, avoiding the pitying stares that are no doubt directed at him. He must look like hell. Jonathan doesn't look much better.

Joyce knows. Hopper broke the news to her last night. They're down at the police station, working through various plans of action. And getting nowhere.

It's Lucas who finally breaks the pregnant silence.

"We have to do something. And quickly. The longer they're in the Upside Down, the less likely we'll ever see them again." He says, looking at them all.

"So . . . let's go kick some monster ass." Dustin says, though the usual humor is lacking. His words are hollow.

"Yeah . . . that. I brought some weapons, uh, knives and stuff from Vietnam. And a couple flashlights. The Wrist Rocket . . ." Lucas trails off, looking sheepish.

"First, we need to find a Gate. The one in the lab closed, remember?" Dustin says.

"Yeah. Did anyone bring a compass?"

"You think I'm really that dense? Of course I brought a compass." Dustin scoffs. He pulls a small, brass one out of his jeans pocket and holds it out for everyone to see.

"Is it true North?"

"Yeah." Dustin says, solemnly. He peers at the sky, squinting in the early morning light.

"So . . . what now?"

"We can go back to the lab, see if the Gate opens again." Dustin suggests. Lucas shakes his head.

"The police will be all over that place. We won't make it two feet without getting caught by Hopper's guys."

"Why is that so bad?" Dustin says, exasperated.

"I told you. If Hopper finds out what we're up to, he'll stop us for sure. He's not going to let us do anything to help El and Will. We'll be under house arrest or something." Lucas says, picking at a thread on his sleeve. "Plus, if Hopper is looking for a gate, and so are we, one of us is bound to find a way in. We can rescue El and Will and get out before another monster comes and eats us."

"I thought Will is a monster." Dustin says. Lucas opens his mouth, closes it again. Jonathan chews on his lip, fighting tears.

"He's not a monster. He's our best friend, and we're going to save him." Mike says, firmly. He exhales, pinching the bridge of his nose. His head pounds, and his thoughts are fuzzy.

"Well, if you don't want to go to the lab, then where should we go? Where is a portal to another dimension most likely to open up?" Dustin says. Everyone is quiet for a moment, all eyes fixated on the ground.

"Nancy and I found a Gate in the woods, a couple miles away from the lab. A small one, inside a tree. If we hike around there . . . I don't

know, it's a start." Jonathan says, looking distant. His fingernail runs up the grain of the wood on the bat's handle.

Mike nods, looking at Jonathan.

"It's a start."

. . .

El catches up to Will about a mile from the lab. He stops suddenly, and kneels by a thin, murky stream. She slows to a careful jog, not wanting to scare him or tempt him into running away again. El makes her presence obvious, breaking branches under her feet as she comes. Will rests head in his hands, fighting for breath. He doesn't look up, doesn't run.

She stops when she's close enough to reach out and touch him.

"Will?" She says, tentatively.

He wipes at his eyes, still staring at the ground. Around them, the world is wrought with a silence fit for the dead. El glances around, checking for any immediate signs of danger, before returning her attention back to the distraught boy beside her.

"Will, what are you doing here?"

He doesn't answer, doesn't meet her eyes. She inhales, closing her eyes for a moment. Will's stooped shoulders shudder, and the hands that obscure his face are trembling.

"Will, you need to talk to me. Or at least, listen. The Gate closed, and until we can find a way to get back, we're stuck here. Will, we need to stay safe. Please . . ." El sinks to her knees beside him, places a hand on his shoulder. He flinches, but doesn't pull away. Still, he refuses to look at her.

"I think we should find shelter." El says, biting her lip.

"Will. I know why you did it. I know that you think you're doomed to be here. I know you think you're a monster, Will. But you're not. You're not. This is just a sickness, Will. And you can fight it, I know

you can . . ." El trails off, words caught in her throat. She's not good at this. Mike's the one that excels in this area. He can always be counted on to lend a word of comfort. El has never been good with words.

"You're not a monster, Will." Her voice doesn't sound like her own. She's fighting tears.

"You're not a monster."

Will lowers his hands, meets her eyes. She keeps talking, pleading with him. And then she's crying and he's crying for who knows how long. When they've cried themselves out, the silence returns. But it's better now. Somehow.

El rises to her feet, wiping tears from her eyes. She holds out her hand, and Will takes it.

. . .

They go to the Ives' house. El clambers up the mossy porch steps and pushes on the door. It swings open, hinges groaning. She pauses in the entryway, gaze sweeping across the room. The walls are covered in vines and slimy membrane. The whole place is bathed in shadow, and tendrils of fog caress her skin.

Will follows, a few steps behind, as she enters the kitchen. Somehow, it feels safer here. She opens the cabinets, looking for food. Everything is covered in plant matter, rotten and inedible. Will goes to the sink, turning the handle. A stream of black, toxic-looking water trickles out of it. El grimaces.

"Maybe there's some water bottles in here . . ." El says, turning to the refrigerator. El attempts to open it and finds the door sealed shut, ensnared in goo and moss. She throws her shoulder against it, and the metal door groans. The vines tear, and the door swings open with a sickening *squelch*.

"Ugh." El says, wiping her hands on her jeans. She looks through the contents of the fridge. There are four water bottles inside. The plastic is covered in slime, but the water on the inside is seemingly

untouched. She hands one to Will and twists the cap off her own, taking a swallow. It's the best thing she's ever tasted.

Will takes a few huge gulps. El lays a hand on his shoulder.

"Wait . . . make it last. We might be here a while." El says, chewing on her lip. It's true . . . they could be here for a while. Days. She trusts Hopper, he knows what to do, and she hopes he'll have the sense to stop Mike from doing anything stupid. But she's the only one who can open the Gate. Right now, she doesn't have the strength.

El looks at Will. He, in turn, avoids her gaze. He stares at the floor.

"You should rest." He says. His voice is ragged, hollow.

"Both of us need to rest. We can sleep in my room." El says, quietly. She leaves the kitchen and makes her way up the stairs, not touching the railing for fear of the slime. Her room is no different than the rest of the house. Her turntable, the books on the shelves, everything has been overcome with the strange membrane and goo. Only a small amount of faint light leaks in through her bedroom window.

Her fingers brush over the Supercom. She takes the device in her hands, switches it on. It fills with static, so much that she could never hope to hear anything from it. She doesn't need it, anyway. She needs to stay away from Mike . . .

To keep him safe.

El crosses the room, sits on the edge of her bed. The plants that have overgrown the blankets make a weird noise under her weight.

She's numb and exhausted. Every muscle in her body is rigid, coiled like wire. Desperation is draped across her shoulders, and it's suffocating. El digs her fingernails into the soft inside of her forearm, attempting to ground herself. Bad memories are beginning to resurface, and it's all she can do to block them out. She can hear the cries of the people she's murdered, the lilt of Papa's lies, the Demogorgon's shriek. . .

"El?"

"Yeah?"

"You okay?"

Will is crouched beside her, eyebrows knit together. She takes a breath and stands from the bed. She looks at him and forces a smile.

"Yes."

They set to work, pulling the blankets off the bed. She lays them on the floor, and Will begins peeling as much of the slime and plant matter off as possible. When they have a decent place to sleep, they settle down. Will curls on his side, immediately nodding off. El stares at the ceiling, listening to his rhythmic inhale and exhalations, trying not to think of Mike and thinking of nothing else.

She falls asleep with his name on her lips.

. . .

Thud.

El sits bolt upright, fist clenching around the slimy, cold blankets. She squints in the perpetual semi-darkness. For a terrifying second, she doesn't know where she is. The memory returns, and every horrifying detail hits her with renewed intensity. She squeezes her eyes shut, willing herself into the Rightside Up, willing the slimy plants to disappear. When she opens them again, the room is the same. Darkness surrounds everything, and air is damp and cold. She sucks in a breath, trying to figure out what woke her, why her heart is beating so fast . . .

Thud.

Will stirs, moaning. He says something, but the words are unintelligible, muffled.

Thud. Thud.

El detaches herself from the moss-covered blankets, clambers to her feet.

"Will . . ." She whispers. She can hear her heartbeat in her head.

"Whazthematter?" He groans, loudly.

Thud.

"Will, there's something in here."

"What?" He props himself up on one elbow, rubbing his eyes.

"Be quiet." She moves to the doorway, making her way out into the hall. The thudding and scraping grows louder. Whatever it is, it's making no effort to go unnoticed.

El squints, trying to make out anything in the darkened hallway. There's a soft scraping noise, and a sound of something big dragging across the ground. She holds her breath.

There's a sharp hiss. El jumps back, horrified, as the silhouette of something big and inhuman moves through the darkness, heading straight toward them.

18. Monsters and Men

The beast stands on two, thick legs. It bobs its large, reptilian head. It's got a slight underbite, and long, yellowing fangs point upward. There are several eyes on either side of its head, and it lashes its thick, scaled tail in agitation. Its chest is wide, and its joints and bones jut out under the skin, forming knobby points in various places. It looks like some freak accident cross between a dinosaur and a bulldog. It tastes the air, nostrils flaring.

Mike steps back, gripping Mr. Sinclair's knife in one hand. His heart hammers in his chest, so loud in his ears that he's sure everyone can hear it beating. Blood rushes to his head.

Lucas and Dustin stand on either side of him, pale and frozen in place. Afraid to run. Afraid to make a sound.

The creature whistles, taking a step toward them. Mike's hands shake. He looks around, desperately searching for an escape. The thing gives another low, mournful whistle and lunges. Not at Mike, but at Jonathan. The oldest Byers boy collapses under the weight of the monster, and the spiked bat flies from his grip. The monster's claws shred Jonathan's jacket as if it were tissue paper.

Mike makes his feet move, and he plunges the knife deep into the skin on the beast's neck. It cries out, and Mike just has time to yank the knife out before it steps off of Jonathan and turns to face him. It works its powerful jaws, lips pulled back in a snarl. Its multiple sets of eyes flash as it dives for him. Mike waves the knife in front of the beast, to protect himself. It hesitates, and Mike takes the opportunity to open a four inch gash on the top of its snout. He tries again, aiming for the eyes, and misses.

The creature's tail strikes him on the side, and he loses his balance. It's on top of him, pinning him against the dirt and dead leaves. The monster's claws sink into his hoodie, and his shoulder presses painfully into the tree roots half buried in the soft soil. The thing's hot breath hits his face. Long threads of saliva land on his cheeks and in his hair. Mike can't breathe, the pressure on his lungs is too great. He tries to yell, to cry out, but he can't make a sound. His nerves are

on fire, and every muscle is rigid. His heart flutters, as if it's aware that he is inches from death . . .

The pressure on his chest lifts. Mike coughs, rolling out from under the beast. He scrambles to his feet, hand pressed against his chest, sucking in a great breath of air. His vision falters, and everything around him is dim.

Mike blinks, watching as Lucas wrestles with the creature. It happens within split seconds. The creature's jaw locks around Lucas as he plunges his knife into the chest of the beast. It loosens its hold on Lucas and falls, bloody claws scratching weakly at the knife's handle. Jonathan lunges forward and rips the knife out of the monster's skin, eliminating the last barrier between its blood and the earth. It convulses, bleeds out in a matter of minutes. Eventually, it falls limp, unmoving and very very dead. Jonathan stares at it, jaw clenched, fist locked around the knife.

Mike and Dustin rush to Lucas' side. He lies on the ground, and the plants and dead leaves under him are smeared scarlet. Mike reaches him first. He takes his own knife and slices the fabric of Lucas' shirt, tearing the fabric away from the wound. Long lacerations run the length of his chest and upper arm. Blood leaks from the puncture marks, where the beast's teeth sank into the flesh. Mike holds his breath, and the sky seems to be spinning.

"He's hurt. Bad." Mike says, not taking his eyes off the wound. Lucas moans, slipping in and out of consciousness. Shreds of tendon and muscle hang loosely in some places. His entire upper arm is mutilated.

"Oh my god." Dustin yells. "Oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god." Mike glances at him. Dustin pales, turning away from the wound.

"We need to stop the bleeding." Jonathan says, dropping to his knees beside Mike. Lucas continues to moan. The wound is bleeding profusely, and it runs down the length of arm and pools on the ground beneath them.

Mike nods.

"Do we have a first aid kit?"

"What?" Dustin says, squeezing his eyes shut.

"We need a first aid kit. Check in the bag."

"Where is-"

"Over there." Mike yells, pointing towards the backpack, which lies a couple yards away.

"Hurry!"

Dustin gets to his feet and jogs over to the pack, unzipping it with shaking hands.

"Mike, we didn't bring one."

"Shit." Mike swears, biting his lip. His hands are unsteady, and the gravity of the situation is making it hard to think straight. His thoughts get jumbled together, and he's panicked and frustrated. He is so afraid . .

Mike takes the knife and cuts the sleeve off of his hoodie. He presses the fabric against Lucas' chest and the skin where the arm meets the shoulder, the parts that look the worst. Jonathan appears beside him, pale and shaken. He springs into action, though, mirroring Mike, tearing more cloth from his clothes. Lucas' eyelids flutter, and his mouth contorts into an agonized grimace. Tears leak from the corners of his eyes. His chest heaves.

"Lucas . . ." Dustin whines, gazing down at his friend. He wrings his hands nervously.

Mike shakes his head, cursing under his breath as the fabric of his hoodie is soaked through in seconds.

"He needs an ambulance. He's losing too much blood." Mike says.

"I'll find a phone." Dustin says, sprinting towards the road. They're out in the middle of the woods, about a mile off of Mirkwood.

Mike presses a fresh strip of cloth onto the wound, looking around at the trees and the darkening skyline. His eyes land on the corpse of the reptilian monster, and he shivers.

"Shit." Jonathan says, watching the blood blossoming on the makeshift bandages beneath their fingers. "Dammit, Lucas."

The injured, incoherent boy lets another, anguished cry escape his lips.

"We need to move him." Mike says, looking at the older boy. Jonathan raises his eyebrows.

"What? Why?"

"The blood . . ." Mike says, looking around at the soiled bandages and stained leaves.

"Blood draws the Demogorgon, remember? If there are monsters, here, in the Rightside Up, maybe they can smell it, or maybe Will . . ." He trails off, not sure what to think. Jonathan stares straight ahead, thinking. Mike glances around, searching for any sign of a threat.

"I don't think we can move him. It'll make it worse."

"What if it comes . . ."

"We just have to sit it out and hope that Dustin finds a phone. Fast." Jonathan says. Mike nods, falls silent.

So they sit with Lucas, holding the clothing strips against the wound, watching the sun sink lower in the sky. Eventually, Dustin returns to them, followed closely by several paramedics clutching a rolling stretcher.

Immediately, they go to work, pushing Mike and Jonathan aside. They swath Lucas in bandages and check his vitals. One of the EMT's approaches them and begins to ask questions. The man catches sight of the monster's corpse and freezes. He pales, mouth slightly agape as he stares at the beast.

"What . . . what the hell is that?" He says. The man scrambles

backward, trying to put as much distance between him and the body as possible. His gaze moves between Jonathan and Mike, dumbfounded. Jonathan stares at the ground. Mike shrugs, shaking his head.

"Is Lucas going to be okay?" Jonathan asks, avoiding the man's eyes. They can't say much without sounding completely crazy.

"It's a pretty nasty wound, and whatever that thing is..." The man shakes his head, incredulous. "Jesus Christ."

Mike watches as they fasten the straps around Lucas' legs and waist. The EMTs take a last, frightened glance at the corpse. One of them scribbles furiously on a notepad. The other is speaking into a walkie talkie, brows knit together. Sweat glistens on the man's forehead.

Mike bends down and picks up the backpack, slinging it over one shoulder. He takes a shaky breath, trying to gather his bearings.

The paramedics cart the stretcher through the woods, and Mike, Dustin, and Jonathan follow closely behind. It takes a while to navigate the thing through the dense foliage and trees. With every jostle and bump, every hinderance, Mike winces sympathetically, praying that Lucas is going to be okay. He's seen the wound, though. Once the blood loss reaches a certain point, there's no going back.

They reach the main road as the sun slips away. A couple police cars have arrived, and, to Mike's horror, a cluster of government officials flanked by armed military officers. One of the paramedics points them in the direction they came from, talking animatedly. A tall, dark haired man gives the EMT a curt nod and says something to his companions. Mike watches a military officer as he fiddles with his pistol, detaching and reattaching the magazine absentmindedly.

Mike glances around, searching for Hopper. There are only unfamiliar faces. He swallows. The officers walk past Mike, Dustin, and Jonathan, giving them no acknowledgment. Mike watches them go, delving deeper into the treeline.

Dustin offers to ride in the ambulance with Lucas. Jonathan nods. Mike puts a hand on Dustin's shoulder, offering some meager

reassurance. The corners of Dustin's mouth twitch upward, but it's forced. He clammers into the back of the ambulance, settling himself beside the stretcher. The doors shut, and Mike is left to watch, with a sick feeling in his gut, as the sirens begin to wail and it speeds away.

Jonathan turns to him, looking exhausted and weary.

"C'mon. We'll meet Dustin at the hospital." He says. Mike nods, taking a last glance at the backs of the men in black suits. He follows Jonathan to his car, ignoring the bitter taste on his tongue.

. . .

Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair are pretty shaken after hearing the news. Of course, they know about El and where she came from. They have limited knowledge of the Upside Down. This, though, makes it more real for both of them than anything else that's happened.

They sit dutifully by their son, weary and unsettled. Mike sits in a chair across from them, bouncing his knee nervously. They're in Lucas' hospital room. Dustin is asleep in the chair beside him, snoring softly. Jonathan is outside, talking with his mom. He can hear their voices through the door, though the words are muffled and he can't really tell what they're saying.

Mike watches the clock as it ticks, and each second seems to last an eternity. He feels as if he is suffocating.

They're keeping him overnight, at the very least. They gave him a bunch of stitches and a ridiculous amount of pain killers. Now, he lies, asleep and at peace. For now.

The doctors say he'll need physical therapy. It'll take a few weeks for the wound to heal. The emergency room nurses were shocked, at first. Mike heard the EMTs say it was a dog that attacked Lucas. Mike guesses those government guys told them to lie. So they can sweep it under the rug like they did the Demogorgon. So they can act like nothing bad ever happens. That way, the public stays happy. Happy and ignorant.

Mike gets to his feet, suddenly lightheaded. He crosses the room and

wrenches open the door. He passes Jonathan and Mrs. Byers without a word, pushing through the double doors at the end of the hall. He makes his way through the maze of hallways and hospital rooms without really thinking about where he's going.

Eventually, he finds himself outside, standing at the edge of the sidewalk. He fights for breath, overwhelmed. An inky black darkness is draped over the town. He stares at the streetlights, the occasional car that rumbles past, chasing circles around his head.

Mike runs a hand through his hair, staring at the sky, the houses with lit windows. The people in them, people he's known his whole life. Ignorant. Oblivious. Blind to everything that's happened. Blind to the government men and the monsters in the woods.

"Mike!" Mike turns, looking over his shoulder. Dustin jogs toward him, panting, clutching a stitch in his side.

"Mike, wait up!"

"What?" He says, turning around to face his friend. Dustin leans against the wall of the hospital, looking at him.

"Dude, you just had a mini freak-out. What's up?" Mike looks at him, lets out a shaky breath.

"I . . . I just needed some air."

"Oh." Dustin says. Mike's expression softens. He pats his friend's shoulder.

"I'm worried about Lucas."

"Me too."

They fall silent for a moment.

"I'm scared. This is all so fucked up. It's bullshit." Dustin is yelling now, hands balled into fists. He tugs on his hat, frustrated. "It's bullshit! All of it! The Upside Down and the fucking monsters and Will and El...." His nostrils flare.

Mike, surprised by his outburst, struggles to find something to say. Dustin looks at him, shakes his head.

"And you, Mike. You walk around caring like you're the only one who's worried about them. You act like you're all alone in this, but you're not. Losing El... losing her hurts like hell. Sometimes you forget that she's our friend too. She's my friend. She's Lucas' friend. And it hurts, losing her." Dustin is crying now, and breathing heavily. He wrings his hands, glaring at Mike. "I just want you to know that you can talk to us. You look like hell, and I need you to know that we're in this together. All of us."

Mike chokes on a lump in his throat, brushes at the wetness in his eyes. Dustin pulls him into a bone-crushing hug. Mike hugs his friend back, feeling some of the weight leave his shoulders. Dustin steps back, wiping at his tears.

"C'mon, let's go back inside."

19. Freefall

The creature's body hits El square on, causing her to fall backwards. She hits her head on the wood floor, cries out in pain and fear. Its hot breath brushes against her neck. She struggles to make sense of it, and every sound is loud in her ears. She can hear Will, yelling. Mustering up the strength, she levitates the monster off of her, and it strikes the wall. She crawls away, gasping for air. She turns to face it as it recovers, dazed but obviously not dead.

It's a serpent, about eight feet long and covered in smooth scales. It shakes its head and opens its mouth, which is big enough to swallow a person. It hisses, eyes flashing. It's a dull green-grey in color and coated in slime, like everything else in this place. El jumps to her feet. Will grabs El's arm and pushes her backwards, putting himself between her and the snake.

"Will!"

The snake lunges toward them, fangs flashing. El screams, her arm reaching out. The snake gives a little shriek as her telekinetic blow hits it square in the snout. She takes advantage of its distraction to grab Will's arm, pulling him towards the window. Her fingers fumble with the latch, but it's covered in strange membrane and slime, making it hard to get a grip. She tugs on the window, fear climbing into her throat. The wood window frame groans, doesn't budge.

The snake's wild, angry hissing is harsh in her ears, and her breath catches in her throat. She feels a familiar, momentary rush of adrenaline. She closes her eyes, mentally reaching toward the monster. She holds it in place, keeping it from reaching them.

"Stand back." Will says. El steps backwards, eyes wide. He picks up a heavy, hardbound book and throws it against the window. Hard. The glass shatters, opening a gaping maw of jagged shards. The snake is thrashing, trying to free itself from El's invisible grasp. She can feel her strength lessening. Time is running out. Will pulls the blankets off the floor and tosses them over the broken glass around the edge of the window.

"El, El c'mon, let's go . . ." Will says. El shakes her head.

"Go. I can hold it . . . a little longer." Will hesitates, looking at her, before clambering out of the window.

releases her grip on the serpent. All the energy leaves her, and the ground lurches beneath her feet. Blood leaks from her ears, her nose. She can't muster the strength to wipe it away. She attempts to step toward the window. The snake moves toward her. El glances down, perplexed, to find its jaws clamped around her forearm. Its fangs sink into her skin. The hot, searing pain brings her out of a sort of reverie. She cries out, wrenching her arm away. The serpent rears back, hissing. El scrambles towards the window. Without thinking, without hesitating, she jumps.

The cool, damp air hits her like a wall. And she's falling. Fast. Her stomach sinks, sickeningly, and the lightheadedness of the freefall overwhelms her for a moment.

Her shoulder takes the brunt of the fall. The pain is sudden and overwhelming. The oxygen is knocked from her lungs. Her eyes water, and she struggles to take a breath. She pushes herself up on her hands and knees, coughing and gasping. Will is by her a side in seconds, saying her name, frantic. Her hand finds her collarbone, which seems to be a few inches too high. Tears leak from the corners of her eyes, staining her cheeks. There's a horrendous pain in her shoulder, and hard bump beneath the skin that should not be there.

"Are you alright?" Will says. She shakes her head, still searching for breath. They can still hear the snake, hissing and screeching inside the house. El lifts her arm, which takes a bit of effort because it feels so heavy. Like it's made of lead. She watches the hot, dark blood as it pools around the wound and streams down the length of her arm. There are two puncture holes in the soft skin of her forearm, each about three inches deep.

"El, did it bite you?" Will says, loudly. Her vision doesn't seem to be working right, and his face is blurred. Fuzzy. She nods, opening her mouth to say something. She's cut off by a deafening streak. She turns to see the snake pushing its way out of the front door. The porch groans under its weight. Will pulls El to her feet, pushing her

forward.

"Run." He says. She stumbles a little, clutching her shoulder. Will urges her on, and they take off, across the street and into the murky blackness.

. . .

"Fuck." Dustin groans as Mike takes out one of his knights.

"Check." Mike says, grinning at Dustin's distress. Lucas laughs, then winces. He draws a sharp breath, trying to conceal the dull ache that shoots through his body. The almost inaudible sound of distress is not lost on his two friends, who turn toward him in unison, so fast it's almost comical. They shoot him looks of concern. Lucas shakes his head.

"I'm fine."

"Yeah, cuz getting mauled by a bigass lizard demon is totally a walk in the park. You're totally fine." Dustin says, rolling his eyes.

"Totally." Lucas replies, voice dripping with sarcasm.

They're sitting beside Lucas' hospital bed. He's been here for a few days, and already, the confinement is making him crazy. Mrs. Sinclair brought them a couple games and things to keep away the boredom.

Mike returns his attention to the chess surveys the board, tongue between his teeth in apparent concentration. Strategically, he moves his bishop so it defeats Mike's remaining rook. The lanky teen curses under his breath.

"Yeah, Mikey. Who's grinning now?"

"Oh, shut your mouth, Henderson," Lucas snaps. "If El were here, she'd beat all your asses."

"Only cuz she's got superpowers." Dustin whines, pouting.

"Yeah. Mike, believe me, that girlfriend of yours? She cheats." Lucas says, laughing.

"She's merciless." Dustin says, in an awed whisper. Lucas giggles.

Their laughter is cut short by the look on Mike's face. An awkward, heavy silence hangs over the trio. Mike clears his throat, avoiding eye contact. He swallows hard, deterring the unwanted attention he's receiving by making his next move. He aimlessly moves one of his pawns a space forward. In his haste, however, he leaves his king wide open. Dustin seizes his chance.

"Checkmate." He says, though his enthusiasm is somewhat deflated. Mike forces a smile.

"You win."

Lucas groans, rolling his eyes.

"C'mon Wheeler, quit sulking. We're gonna find her. And Will."

Mike swallows, again. He nods, still not meeting his friends' eyes.

"Want a rematch?" Dustin offers, worried. Mike's been in bad shape. El's current situation is a touchy subject, and one they've been tiptoeing around the past couple days. Any mention of her brings on another visit from Zombie-Mike, a nickname they dubbed their friend because of the grief and worry induced lethargy that has overcome him. He's removed, distant and depressed. They don't blame him.

Constant worry plagues all three of them. And it's hard to sit here, playing a chess game, trying to ignore the fact that they're in a hospital and two out of five of the party are stuck in an alternate dimension.

Mike's behavior concerns them the most. They are useless to him, helpless as they sit by and watch their friend descend into some unreachable place. They try to ignore it. Mike tries to deny it. But the truth is, Mike is terribly, awfully lost. Lost without his significant other. Lost with El. And he's losing his battle.

He's losing his will to live.

Sometimes, he thinks he hears her voice. Sometimes, he catches sight of a light flickering out of the corner of his eye. At the time, he's

almost positive it's her. But the more he considers it, the more he doubts. If she really wanted to communicate with him, wouldn't she reach out to him mentally? Or through the Super Com?

He's probably hallucinating. He's delusional, and nursing false hope.

"Sure." Mike says, forcing a smile. Dustin blinks, surprised and relieved by his friend's compliance. Grateful for the distraction, he begins to rearrange the pieces on the board while Lucas picks at a thread on the blanket that is draped across his legs, sorrowfully watching Mike as he hastily wipes his eyes when he thinks no one is looking.

. . .

El grits her teeth, failing to suppress a scream. Will, looking pale and little queasy, immediately stops prodding at her shoulder. His hands spring away from her skin as if he's been shocked by electric current.

El is slumped against a wall. Her face is painted in a mask of tears. Will kneels beside her. They're in some sort of basement, but it's smaller and more narrow than Mike's. The ceilings are low, and Will is pretty tall, so it causes him some difficulty. He stoops low, shoulders hunched awkwardly. He's grateful, though, for the hiding place. And the fact that the snake didn't follow them in here. Miraculously, the plant matter and membranes are less here.

El holds her injured arm close to her body, but it remains bent at an awkward angle. Her other arm is stained with congealed blood and hangs limply at her side. From the look on her face, she's in a great deal of pain. He can only imagine . . .

Will figures he should work on the shoulder first, knowing the bite will heal. With time. Unless of course, that snake was venomous. He doesn't think so, though. If it was, he would've lost her already.

He shakes his head, wondering how on Earth he managed to walk away from that attack unscathed. Cursing the fact that El came off so much worse....

She moves her head to look at him, her mouth twisted into an

agonized grimace. Her eyelids flutter, and her head tips forward slightly, looking as if she's about to pass out. He bites on his tongue to keep himself from freaking out. The slight pain helps him focus on the task at hand.

"El." Will says, softly. His stomach sinks. Maybe it was venomous. Maybe the poison is finally working its way into her bloodstream. She looks so weak, so fragile . . .

He pushes the foul thought from his mind. He's not about to watch her die. He won't let it happen.

"Stay with me, okay? You gotta stay awake." He begs. She doesn't answer.

"El, you dislocated your shoulder. We have to get it back in place." He says the words slowly, carefully, because she doesn't look like she's processing anything too well. To Will's surprise, however, her gaze refocuses and her expression softens. She nods, drawing a shaky breath.

"I think I can maneuver it back in place, if I . . . if I pull on it . . ." He trails off. His stomach twists itself into a knot, just thinking about it. She bites her lip, gazing at him tearfully. She gives him another little nod.

"Okay, um. Shit. So I'm just going to try to get it back in." He takes her hand, feeling around the hard knob. He gives it a gentle tug. She screams, wrenching out of his grasp.

"I'm sorry. I know it hurts. You need to trust me, alright? We have to get this over with." El nods, grits her teeth. Fresh tears glitter on her lashes.

"Okay. Lay down. I'm gonna go fast this time. I think I can get it." Hesitantly, El moves so she's lying on her back. Will takes a deep breath, runs a hand through his hair. His eyes reach around the basement for any last bit of reassurance for what he's doing. He's only seen it done once, on T.V. The thought is far from comforting. He doesn't want to hurt her, but this is their only option.

He takes her hand. She squeezes her eyes shut, blowing out another breath. Her nostrils flare.

"Ready? One, two, three." He pulls, hard. The sounds that escape El's mouth are not human. Her agonized screams strike physical pain deep inside his chest. He keeps pulling, though. He doesn't stop. Her shoulder shifts, and there's an odd clicking noise as it moves back into place.

The screams cease, and El's eyes fly open. Her face breaks into a twisted sort of smile. She breathes a sigh of relief, giggling a little. Will laughs, too. She sits up, gingerly, opposite hand reaching for her shoulder. Her fingers run over the swollen skin, and she continues to giggle. Her quiet chuckling soon grows into a loud, bursting, insane kind of laughter. Both of them sit there, on the floor, laughing like crazy people. Tears still spill from the corners of her eyes, but she's smiling.

"Feel better?"

She nods, hand flying to her face in an attempt to cover the ridiculous, snorting laughter that explodes from her mouth.

"Let me see your other arm." Will says. He looks at the puncture wounds. It's slightly swollen, but the blood has dried. El winces at his touch. Will glances around the room, suddenly feeling helpless. They have no medical supplies. They have nothing to keep out infection. He swallows, meets her eyes.

"You should get some rest." He says, leaning against the wall. She nods, gazing at him tiredly.

"Thank you, Will." She says.

"Just don't go jumping out of another two-story high window anytime soon." He says, chuckling. She gives him a halfhearted, breathy laugh.

Carefully, she moves so she is lying on her side. Will watches her for a while, as her breathing slows and she drops into a deep sleep. He keeps his eyes on the rise and fall of her chest, making sure she keeps

breathing. With each inhalation, exhalation, comes a swell of relief that builds up inside him. He finds himself drifting off, into the warm and welcoming darkness.

. . .

Hopper rolls the cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, gazing out of the window absentmindedly. An empty glass sits a few inches away from his left hand. His fingernail traces the grain of the wood. Carefully, he slips the cigarette pack out of his shirt pocket and lights another one from the end of the first. He leans back in his chair, watching the smoke as it curls and dances in the air, slowly dissipating. He lets the clamor and noise of the place, the dim light, the warmth, lull him into a reverie.

His mind wanders to those kids, trapped in the Upside Down. The guilt plagues him. He was supposed to look out for them. He was supposed to protect them. He failed.

This resurgence, this sudden return of supernatural forces, disturbs him more than anything. The whole thing is fucked up. Why now, after such a long respite?

Hopper thinks of Joyce, the lines in her face, the perpetual expression of harried agony that she wears. Hadn't she suffered enough? Hadn't they all? The guilt burns in the back of his throat, a bitter taste. And he swallows it, knocks it back with another sip of hard liquor.

He knows it's useless to sit here and curse the universe, to retreat back to bad habits, but it's his only line of defense.

He made a bet with Flo, about a year ago. Claimed he'd quit smoking. He succeeded, for a little while. Until the guilt and the bad memories came chasing after him. Until Sarah crept back into his thoughts.

Hopper's gaze follows the trail of smoke as it dances and lingers in a cloud around his head. He rubs his eyes, attempting to rid the itchy he exhaustion from them, chews the inside of his cheek.

His radio pops and crackles, and he is jerked rudely to the present. His hand flies to the device, finger pressing the button.

"Hey, Chief, you there?" Officer Callahan's voice floats through the radio. Hopper leans back in his chair, putting out his cigarette.

"Yeah." He says, voice rough.

"Chief, we're gonna need you down here at the station as soon as possible."

Hopper's stomach twinges, several thoughts race through his mind, though only two stand apart from the rest. Will. El. God knows where they are, if they're alright.

He steels himself, forces his voice to remain steady. His finger shake.

"What . . . happened?"

20. Thantophobia

Thantophobia *noun* ~ The fear of losing someone you love.

Hopper curses under his breath, thumbing through a disorganized pile of papers. He fishes a blank incident report from the bottom of the stack and drops into the chair behind his desk. He runs a hand over his stubbly face and stares at the man sitting across from him. Hopper's fingers dance impatiently over the typewriter keys.

Peter Reeves leans forward in his chair, bloodless hands clasped tightly together. He's in his early thirties, with short hair and glasses that keep sliding stubbornly down the bridge of his nose. He keeps pushing them up. One of his toes taps out an irregular beat on the carpeted floor of Hopper's office. His face is shadowed and etched with harried distress.

"Mr. Reeves, tell me exactly what happened the night your wife disappeared." Hopper says, calmly. Instinctively, he drops into his unruffled facade. He is able to push his fear and unease away, focus on the task at hand. He is relieved to find that his voice is steady.

"She was working a late shift last night, at that Café over on Sycamore. She . . . she didn't come back." Mr. Reeves says, quietly. His voice trembles. "I tried calling, they said she was the closer. The last one to leave." Reeves shakes his head. "Hopper, her car was still there!"

"I called my mother-in-law, thought maybe she payed a visit or something, I don't know. She could have gotten a cab . . . Nothing. Hasn't seen her." Peter Reeves blows out a long sigh, closing his eyes.

"And she didn't mention anything about leaving or spending the night somewhere . . . ?" Hopper says, chewing on his lip. Reeves shakes his head.

"No, no of course not."

"Has she been acting normal? Not taking any medications, no history

of blackouts or confusion or alcohol abuse . . ."

"No."

"And you don't think she's . . . possibly . . . seeing someone else or . . . ?" Reeves' mouth contorts into a grimace, his eyes widen.

"No!"

Hopper nods, reaches for a cigarette.

"What kind of car does she drive?"

"A Ford Fairmont. It's red."

Hopper nods again, notes it down. Reeves runs a hand through his hair in apparent agitation.

"I need to know she's okay, Hopper. This isn't like her. Jamie wouldn't just run off."

"I know. I believe you." Hopper said, taking a long drag on his cigarette. He finishes the last details of the report and clears his throat with finality.

"This is what I want you to do, alright? I want you to go home, pour yourself a glass of wine or what have you. I want you to relax. I'm gonna track down your wife." Hopper stands, places a consoling hand on the younger man's shoulder. Peter Reeves nods, swallowing hard.

"Hopper?"

"Mmmm?"

"You don't think this has anything to do with what happened to the Byers boy?"

Hopper pauses, his body goes rigid. He swallows, forcing himself to meet Reeves' eyes.

"Of course not."

. . .

El wakes to a dull, throbbing ache that runs throughout her entire body. She shifts, moving gingerly into an upright sitting position, ignoring the twinge of pain that erupts in her bad shoulder.

She gazes at her arm, which still feels impossibly heavy. It's red and swollen, and the puncture wounds leak a repulsive, yellowish pus. She wrinkles her nose and resists the urge to touch the wound. Her hands are dirty, and they've had contact with the toxic environment. It will only worsen the infection that's blossoming inside the bite.

El swallows, throat dry and scratchy despite the damp, cold air.

Will turns over in his sleep, mumbling softly. She squints, trying to make out their surroundings in the strange semi-darkness. It's always night here. She wishes she knew what time it is, or even, what day it is. She was wearing a watch when she followed Will through the gate, but it's cracked and no longer functioning. She stares at it remorsefully, but decides against using her powers to repair it. She needs to save her strength.

Will continues to stir, tossing and turning. She shakes him awake. His body tenses, and he sits up so fast it gives her a start. She scrambles back a little, giving him space. Will relaxes when he realizes he's not in any immediate danger. He shrugs, looking sheepish. The Upside Down has them both on edge.

Will rubs the sleep from his eyes, shivers.

"How're you feeling?" He asks.

"Fine." She lies, chewing on her lip.

"Right, like I really believe that. Let me see your arm." He says. Tentatively, she holds her arm out to him. He pales when he sees the wound, tries to conceal how much it scares him. It's worse. Way worse. His shocked, sickened expression is not lost on her, though. She raises her eyebrows, tries to keep away her own panic.

"That bad?"

He takes a deep breath, fakes a smile.

"No, it's not that bad. It'll be okay."

El bites her tongue, places a hand on his shoulder.

"Friends don't lie." She reminds him. She knows it's bad.

All the fight goes out of him, and he gazes at her through tired eyes.

"We don't have medical supplies or anything to clean it with. We don't even have clean water! We need to get you out of here, El. I'm gonna get you out of here." He rubs his temples, sighing. "We need to look for a gate. Another way out."

"When I was stuck here, after I defeated the Demogorgon all those years ago, I opened a gate in the woods. It was different from the one in the lab. Smaller. But now, I don't think I can do it. I can't just open one, Will. I'm . . ." She looks at the wound in her forearm, at her own, thin body. A heavy weight settles in the pit of her stomach. "I'm not strong enough. The only other one I know is in the lab . . . "

Will shakes his head. "It closed."

El's breath lodges in her throat. She swallows hard, averting her eyes.

"I closed it."

Will looks at her.

"It's not your fault."

Tears gather in the corners of her eyes. She gazes at the wound, trying to ignore the exhaustion in her muscles, the ache in her shoulder. The hopelessness of the situation.

"It is." She says, sniffing. She tucks her knees to her chest.

"I closed it to keep Mike out, you know, or he would come after me. I wasn't thinking straight . . . I don't know . . ."

"You closed it to protect him. I get it. It wasn't your fault." Will says, quietly. He gives her a small smile, a real one this time.

"If I were you, I would've done the same goddamn thing."

A breathy laugh escapes her lips. She wipes the tears from her face.

"You really love him." Will says. It's a statement, not a question. She nods.

"I do."

"And he loves you, too."

"He does."

Empty, melancholy silence.

"I couldn't sit there and watch you get lost in this place." She mumbles, quietly. Will looks away, inhaling sharply. "And I couldn't watch Mike come running into hell for me." El says. She wipes her nose.

"He deserves better." She says, hollowly. "He deserves better than the monster they made me."

"I guess we have one thing in common." Will says. He gives a heavy, humorless laugh.

"You're not a monster." El snaps.

"You're not either." He retorts, glaring at her. "So shut your mouth before you talk yourself into thinking that you are, because you're not."

El falls silent. Her eyes rest on his weary face, the dark stains under eyes, the sludge and grime on his skin and hair and clothes.

"I can't lose you," she says, "just like I can't lose Mike." She looks down at her hands, which rest in her lap. "So maybe it's better this way. Maybe I can save both of you, if not myself."

"Don't say that, El." He says, sharply. "Don't say stuff like you're going to die. You're not. I won't let it happen." He pauses, meeting her eyes. "Because you're my sister and my best friend, and I can't lose you

either."

. . .

Mike took El on her first roller coaster when they were fourteen. She was nervous at first, and he tried time and time again to reassure her. By the time they got to the front of the line, she was shaking. And she clung to him, both hands wrapped around his arm. He was having second thoughts, and she was . . . to put it simply, scared to death.

She didn't breathe. For the first part of the ride, he was so worried about her he didn't even pay attention to the dives and dips and loops. And Mike loved roller coasters, so that was saying a lot. He realized she was holding her breath, eyes wide with fear as the metal coaster roared on its course. He was holding her hand, and she was squeezing it so tight he began to lose the feeling in his fingers.

"Breathe." He yelled, over the wind and the roar of metal on metal as the rollercoaster spun out in a series of tight turns. She didn't seem to hear him, just continued to stare straight ahead, looking sick.

"El! El, are you listening? Breathe." She turned her head, looked at him. Her lips were moving, but no sound came out. He was cursing himself for ever thinking that this was a good idea. He was such an idiot . . . she wasn't ready for something like this.

The roller coaster halted, started making its slow ascent into the air. The iconic drop, the biggest thrill. Mike bit his lip, looked at her.

"Listen to me. We're in this together, right? We're safe. I'm not gonna let you fall."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Now, when we get to the top, we're gonna go down. Really fast. And it's the scariest, best part. And it's better if you scream. Alright? El, are you listening?"

She nodded, eyes wide. She gripped his hand even tighter, if that was even possible.

"When we go down, I want you to scream. Okay?"

"Okay."

The rollercoaster gave a last few clicks and began to tip downwards. Mike didn't have time to look at El, only take a breath as the thing shot down. Fast. He was screaming, and he was sure he could hear El screaming too. And then it was over.

When they were allowed to get off, he helped her up. She was unsteady on her feet, still grasping his hand. When they were safely off, she fell into him, face crashing into his chest. Her shoulders were shaking, and for a terrible moment he thought she was crying.

"El, El. It's alright. It's over. We did it!" He said, taking her face in his hands. And then he got a good look at her face, realized she was laughing. A breathy, giddy sort of laugh. She clung to him, still laughing maniacally.

"Mike, that was . . . that was . . ." She couldn't catch her breath.

"Can we do it again?"

He grinned down at her, her giddiness overwhelming him, wondering how it was possible to be so in love with someone.

"Yeah, El." He pressed a kiss to her lips, pulled her into a hug. "Yeah, we can."

. . .

Mike drags himself up the stairs to his bedroom, taking care to make sure the door is shut tight. He turns off the lights and lets himself fall into bed. He doesn't even bother to take his shoes off.

He reaches for the Super Com, which sits in its usual place on his bedside table. He turns it on, sets it down so it rests on the sheets, near his head. He buries his face in the blankets, squeezing his eyes shut. He does not cry. He's already cried himself out.

Instead, he lets the dull ache in his chest overwhelm him, until he can't breathe and he feels like his lungs aren't working properly

anymore. All oxygen leaves the room, and he can't draw a breath, can't make a sound even though he wants to.

He's realizing that loving El is like being on that rollercoaster. She's an overwhelming, giddy rush of adrenaline. She's the scream building up in his chest. She's his whole life force.

Right now, all he wants to do is scream at the top of his lungs. He wants to shout into the void. But he can't. He can't and he can't breathe. And he said he wouldn't let anything happen to her and he failed. He lost her, and he's suffocating. She was the very air in his lungs and he lost her.

. . .

"Hop? What're you-"

"I came to check on you."

The Chief stands on Joyce Byers' doorstep, fidgeting, rolling an unlit cigarette between his fingers.

"Oh. Come in, come in." She says, waving him inside. She rushes to the kitchen without giving him a second glance. "Can I get you anything? Coffee? A beer?" Her voice wavers. She opens the refrigerator door. "I need to remind Jonathan to buy some more sodas, we're out."

"Joyce."

"I can make you something to eat, or-"

"Joyce."

"What?" She snaps, turning toward him. He gets a good look at her face, the mask of dried tears, the exhaustion. It is all too familiar. And he's kicking himself for letting this happen, again. Joyce Byers has been through too much, and he's not so sure she's strong enough to handle everything that's happened. At least this time around.

He follows her into the kitchen, reaches out for her. Her gaze is fixated on the floor, but she relaxes a little at his touch, at the slight,

reassuring pressure of his hand on her shoulder.

They'd had a few dates, after the Incident. A few fits and jumpstarts, but nothing you can really call a relationship. They're friends. They are good company, and they certainly understand one another, but they are just so different. And damaged.

Broken people don't always fit together.

"I should've come by earlier." He says, quietly. She falls silent, gazes up at him.

"No, you shouldn't. You're more use to me out there, looking for him. For . . . for a gate." She says.

"No, I need to know you're okay."

"Okay? No, I'm not okay." She snaps, incredulous. "Will is back in that. . . place. Again. Hop, I'm not okay." She sniffs, sways on her feet. Hopper, more than a little concerned, grips her arm to keep her steady.

"It's just . . . Will. My baby . . . my son, Hop. He doesn't deserve this, none of us deserve this. And I'm useless. Completely useless. I c-can't help h-him." She hiccups, covering her mouth with her hand. All the fight leaves her and she staggers forward. She falls against him, and he pulls her into a hug.

"Joyce, I'm going to find him. I'm going to find him, I'm going to find El. But you need to take care of yourself."

"Hop . . ."

"No, listen to me. You need to take care of yourself. Joyce."

She shakes her head, burying her face in the folds of his jacket. Pitiful, choked sobs erupt in short bursts out her mouth. Her whole body shakes.

"I'm going to find him." He says, quietly. "I promise."

21. Mad Max

Mike's feet move carelessly through the underbrush. The strap of his backpack digs painfully into his shoulder. He switches it from one side to the other. Left to right. Left to right. He forges a path through the foliage and plant decay, fingers brushing along the bark of the trees.

Mike lets his mind wander, and he isn't paying much attention to his surroundings, following the path to Hawkins Laboratory by vague memory alone.

Lucas was released from the hospital this morning. Mrs. Sinclair called to give them the good news. His shoulder, though stitched and in no danger of infection, is nowhere near healed. He needs weeks of physical therapy, exercises to help him retrain the damaged nerves. The monster's claws cut right to the bone, severing major tendons and blood vessels. The doctors say he's lucky to be alive.

Mike shivers.

He recalls the monster's corpse, the blood gleaming on the blade of Lucas' knife, pooling on the dead leaves. The men in black suits and shiny black cars. He's positive they were government people. Bad men.

His fingers find the place above his knee where the bullet made its mark. His mind's eye finds all the places on El's body where they touched her, where their filthy fingers left mangled scars and a whole spectrum of multicolored bruises. Marks that don't belong. Marks that make him want to hurt those men, for what they did to her. Marks that struck rage and hatred in some scarred, gnarled place within him. Still do.

He gives his head a shake, trying to rid himself of those memories. He needs to focus on the task at hand. He's on a mission.

Mike pauses at the fence, hands gripping the rusted chain link, gaze sweeping across the lab. It's nothing but a shell. Vacant, eerily silent.

He takes his backpack off and tosses it over the fence. It lands with a soft *thud* in the dead leaves on the other side. He climbs through the hole, taking care not to get caught on the exposed fencing. He straightens, slinging the pack over his shoulder.

Mike approaches the building, holding his breath. There is nothing. No birdsong. Not even a slight stir of wind. It's too quiet. Mike feels like he's in a vacuum, tries to ignore the sick feeling in his gut. The tiny hairs all over his neck and arms begin to stand on end. He turns, glancing behind him.

Nothing.

Slowly, he works his way around the perimeter, eyes scanning the building and the fence at the edge of the trees.

He reaches out for El mentally, calling her name over and over. He receives no response, only a faint sense of her presence at the edges of his conscious. He has become so used to her mental link that it's hard to distinguish her mind from his own. But she's there, unresponsive but at least alive.

Of course, she's stronger than him, and better at communicating. No matter how hard he tries, he can't reach her. He can only hope that she's okay, hope that she's fighting her way back to him.

Mike takes a breath, continues skirting the building. He keeps glancing over his shoulder every few minutes, fidgeting, wringing his hands. He is uneasy and anxious. Mike can't shake the feeling that he is being watched, though he's almost positive he is completely alone.

He pauses and unzips his backpack, pulling the walkie talkie out of a pocket. He switches it on, switching the channels until he finds the one with the least amount of static. Out here, in the middle of nowhere, it's unlikely that he'll tap into anything else. It's just fuzzy radio silence.

"El?" Mike says. He doesn't know what to expect. Some small part of him thinks that if he's this close to the Gate, maybe it's easier for her to make the connection . . .

"El? El, can you hear me?"

Static.

Silence.

He sighs, frustrated and terrified. Mike starts walking again, picking up his pace. As he rounds the corner of the building, two things happen simultaneously: El's voice floats through the Super Com. She utters a single word: *Mike*. At the same time, Mike finds himself face to face with a monster.

He freezes, thoughts scattering in a billion different directions. The creature clings to the wall of the building. It's like the other one they encountered, but smaller. It's skin is slimy, much like the slugs that Will keeps coughing up. It's legs and snout are shorter, and it doesn't seem to have a tail. It's like a cross between a slug and a lizard, horrendously ugly, it's skin a sickening greenish color.

Mike yelps, scrambling several feet backward. He struggles with the zipper of his backpack, reaching for the knife he brought with him. His hand tightens around the handle just as the thing closes in to attack. It lunges for his legs, sinks its many rows of teeth into his thigh.

Hot, searing pain shoots up Mike's leg. He cries out, stumbling backward. The creature shrieks, and the shrill sound cuts all the way into his bones. He brandishes the knife, trying to defend himself. The monster makes a second attempt to attack him, and the knife is knocked from his grip. It ends up several feet away from him, lying in the grass. Useless.

Mike's immediate panic rises in his throat like bile. He tries to yell, call for help, but he's cut off as the creature slams into him, knocking him off balance. He lands awkwardly, with his arm pinned behind his back. The creature's claws dig painfully into his side, and its teeth graze his cheek as it tries to take a hold of flesh under his jaw, where the jugular is. The main artery. The vein keeping him alive.

The creature's body suddenly twists unnaturally. It cries out and releases its grip on him. Mike clammers away, hands scraping over

the ground as he tries to regain his balance. He turns, trying to see what could've caused the monster to become so distracted.

He's shocked and confused to find another person, a teenage girl, stooped over the creature, both hands wrapped around the handle of the knife as she plunges it into the creature's soft belly. It gives another earsplitting cry, and its body shudders as the life leaves it.

She steps back, chest heaving, hair mussed and eyes wide. She holds the bloodied knife loosely in her right hand. She turns toward him, mouth twisted in an odd grimace, looking utterly nonplussed. Distractedly, she pushes a strand of red hair behind her ear. A flicker of recognition lights in Mike's eyes as he gets a good look at her face.

"What're you doing here?" He blurts out, dumbfounded. Max glowers at him, making no effort to hide her annoyance.

"A simple thank you would be nice. After all, I just saved your sorry ass. Or would you have preferred me to let it eat you alive?" She says, bitterly. Mike seems to remember himself.

"Oh, yeah. Thank you, uh, for saving me."

"You're very welcome." She says, in a falsely sweet voice. She's mocking him.

"But seriously, what are you doing here? How did you . . ." He trails off, staring at the dead monster. The initial shock is wearing off. The shaking in his hands subsides, the fear leaves him. She clears her throat, fidgets uncomfortably.

"I . . . followed you." She says, weakly. Mike looks at her, incredulous.

"Why . . . ?"

She looks suddenly helpless, glancing between Mike and the monster as if trying to figure out which one she'd rather take on a date. He waits patiently for an answer, suddenly very curious. She exhales, closing her eyes for a moment.

"Well, ever since you guys were acting all weird at the Snow Ball, I've

been sorta curious about you, or at least, that friend of yours. Will." She pauses, meeting his eyes.

"And . . . there are rumors, whispers in the halls. People at school say that you guys were involved in some crazy shit a couple years ago. You know, with Will's kidnapping and all. And some things don't add up. And there are other stories about your girl, Eleanor. People say she's . . . different."

Mike stares at his shoes. Heat rises in his cheeks, and his hands curl into fists. His fingernails dig into the soft skin of his palm.

"What do you mean, 'different'?"

Max hesitates, biting her lip.

"I don't know, it's stupid." She shakes her head. "It's just a bunch of bullshit Troy made up, is all."

Mike raises his eyebrows.

"We dated for a while, back in Freshman year." She admits, looking slightly embarrassed. Mike grimaces.

"Gross."

"I know, right? He's always spreading shitty lies about people. I dumped his ass once I realized who he really was. He's got a big mouth. Personally, I think he's compensating." Max says, with a smirk. Mike laughs.

"So . . . you were curious and just decided to stalk me like a creepy psychopath?"

"No, it's not like that!" She cries, suddenly defensive. "I was on Cornwallis. I saw you ride past and I followed you."

"Like a creepy psychopath." Mike interjects, rolling his eyes.

"I wasn't the one heading into the woods. Alone. What are you doing out here, anyway?"

"Looking for something." Mike says.

"For what? This . . . *thing*?" Max asks, nudging the body with her foot.

"No. That thing found me, unfortunately."

"Oh," Max says, looking at him. "So . . . what were you looking for?"

He bites his lip, eyes moving from the monster's bloody corpse to Max's flushed, weary face and back again.

"It's a long story."

"I've got time."

Mike sighs, exasperated.

"Fine. But let's get out of here. That thing gives me the creeps."

Mike glances nervously at the creature, lying motionless on the ground mere feet away from the pair of them. Max nods, eyeing him.

"Good idea."

Mike's fingers find the place where the creature's teeth tore through his jeans, leaving a bloody gash in his thigh.

"Are you alright?" Max says, gesturing towards the wound.

"Yeah, I'll be fine." Mike says, waving her off. He bends down and picks up his backpack. One of the straps is completely shredded, severed by the monster's teeth in its attempt to attack him. Max hands him the bloody knife, and he sticks it in his pocket. He retrieves the Super Com from where he dropped it, a few feet away. It's still intact, belching static.

"El?" He glances at Max, ignoring her perplexed expression. "El, you there?"

She gives no response. He curses himself. She said his name barely five minutes ago, and now she's gone again. He feels the distance now, more than ever. They are universes apart.

He fiddles with the volume, busying himself with the various buttons and knobs, but he knows it's useless.

Max opens her mouth, closes it again. Mike runs his hand through his hair.

"I'll explain. Let's just go, before we run into something worse."

"Worse than that monster? I don't think that's possible."

"Oh, it's possible. Trust me." He says, darkly. She looks incredulous, says nothing.

Mike makes his way back across the grounds, toward the chainlink fence. He climbs through it, and she follows closely behind him. The wound gives him some hindrance. He tries to keep his weight off the injured leg.

He throws a last glance over his shoulder, then sets off into the woods. She struggles to keep up, combating the tangle of roots and shrubs that Mike avoids with ease. Even with the limp, his long legs cover a lot more ground. Max is taller than El, but not by much. And El is *tiny*.

After a few minutes, he stops to let her catch up. Sweat clings to her brow, and she glowers at him in a strangely Karen Wheeler-esque fashion.

"You owe me an explanation."

"Patience is a virtue." Mike points out, annoyed.

Max looks like she wants to hit him, or yell at him, or maybe both. She shakes her head, eyes flashing.

"What's the big deal, anyway? I mean, I *saw* the monster. I *killed* it. What more do you have to hide?"

Mike takes a breath, brushing a lock of dark hair out of his eyes. He avoids her gaze, eyes fixated on his feet as they continue walking.

"A couple years ago, Will went missing."

22. Plus One

He recounts their story, or at least, enough of it to keep her from asking questions. He doesn't even know if she can be trusted. Some part of him knows that telling her all the crazy shit that's happened is taking a big risk. Another part of him hates owing her. She did save his life, after all.

He tells her El's story, and about Terry Ives' involvement in MK Ultra. He spares her some of the details of El's time in the lab, details that Mike can barely bring himself to accept. He tells her how they pulled El out of the rain, how she lived in his basement . . .

He recalls that stormy night. He can hear Lucas' nervous voice through the heavy rain, even now . . .

. . .

"Mike are you crazy?" Lucas spat, voice rising an octave.

"Lucas, look at her, she's freezing and scared." He said, whipping around to face his friend. His fingers kept slipping on the metal handle of the flashlight. His teeth were chattering, from the nerves or the cold or both.

It was hard to tell if she was a boy or a girl. Somehow, he just knew. She was so thin, her hair so short. The raindrops were clinging to the soft down of her scalp, her long eyelashes, the tip of her nose. Without thinking, he peeled off his jacket and stepped forward, offering it to her. She stepped back, gasping slightly.

"It's okay. I'm not gonna hurt you," he could hear himself saying, through the roar of the rain and the anxious fluttering of his heart. He knew she was in trouble. He knew she was in serious danger, that she was caught in some horrible predicament beyond their comprehension.

She squeezed her eyes shut, letting him drape the jacket over her shoulders, careful not to touch. He was nervous that if he did, she'd shatter into a million pieces. Thunder ripped through the air above

them, and she jumped about five feet in the air.

"It's just thunder." He said, loudly, not sure if she can hear him or not.

"Mike, what do we do?" Dustin said, nervously.

"We need to get her out of the rain." Mike said, firmly. He turned to the strange girl wearing a too-big shirt from that burger place down the street. She blinked at him, silent and terrified.

"Do you want to go to my house? To get out of the rain?" He asked. She said nothing, stared blankly at him.

"C'mon." He said, gently, gesturing towards the road. Tentatively, she follows him. She moved skittishly, head turning to and fro, like a frightened animal prepared to flee. His gut twisted in a knot.

Lucas opened his mouth to protest, but Mike shook his head. His friend fell silent, looking at the girl suspiciously.

When they reached the bikes, Mike looked at the girl and the bikes and back again.

"Okay, why don't you get on, and I'll push you . . ." Mike says, slowly, chewing on his lip. The girl took another step forward, eyes darting around. As carefully as possible, Mike helped her climb onto the bike and settle herself on the seat, holding it steady for her. He showed her where to put her hands, on the handlebars, and her feet on the pedals.

"I'm going to push you, alright? I won't let you fall."

He started pushing the bike, and she gave a little gasp, fingers grasping the handle bars and holding fast. It wasn't long before her bony knuckles were bloodless and stark-white in the darkness.

Mike wasn't sure where to put his hands, nervous and twitchy for some reason. He didn't want to scare her, and at the same time, he didn't want her to fall. And she was so unsteady, so fragile.

He settled for placing one hand on her the middle of her back, the other on the handle bars. After a while, she started to sway, going

limp. He opened his mouth, about to yell out, afraid she'd fainted, when he realized she'd just fallen asleep. She slumped forward, nose just brushing the fabric of his dampened t-shirt.

He bit his lip, glancing down at her. Carefully, he reached over and pulled the hood of his jacket over her head. She stirred slightly, then drifted off again, burrowing against his chest.

Mike swallows, mouth hanging slightly agape in surprise. A powerful surge of protectiveness welled up inside him, suddenly. He could feel her shallow breaths against the skin on his neck. Gooseflesh spread across his entire body, and it wasn't from the cold.

. . .

Once he starts talking, he cannot stop. He tells Max how she saved them from the Demogorgon and broke into a million pieces. Everyone thought she was dead. Hell, they had a funeral. And then she showed up three months later, frozen half to death in the snow.

Mike trips over his words in an effort to illustrate what happened to them in '84, how they were both kidnapped. How the government had it out for her until Hopper blew the case open. He fills her in on Will's sickness, and the psychotic episodes in which he becomes something inhuman, terrible.

He tells her about El's latest disappearance, choking back tears as he explains why he was there, at the ruins of the Gate.

She listens intently, growing more and more shocked, confused. When he's finished, he closes his mouth, looking at her. She remains silent for a few moments, taking in the information.

"You're yanking my chain." She says, dully. Mike gives a sharp, humorless laugh .

"You asked for an explanation. I gave it to you. Take it or leave it." He says. He begins to walk faster, annoyed and angry for wasting his time.

"Hang on. You're telling me that you're girlfriend is some psychotic telepath who grew up in a lab, and the Byers boy is half-monster and

pukes slugs?"

"Pretty much."

"Jesus Christ, if I didn't just kill a monster back there, I would think you're completely insane. Psychotic. Jesus . . ." Max says. She runs her fingers through her hair, giving him a hard look.

"So, you believe me?"

"Do I have a choice?" She makes an incredulous noise in the back of her throat, shaking her head.

"I knew that Byers kid was off his nut. And Eleanor . . . damn. No wonder she's so quiet."

Mike bites his lip, avoiding her eyes.

"So, what's your plan?"

"My plan?"

"Yeah, what's your plan? You gotta save your girl from the creepy alternate-dimension, right?"

Mike shakes his head.

"I don't have a plan."

The sound of screeching car tires rips through the air, setting a flock of birds into the air. Mike turns on his heel, looking up the hill, towards the road. Several people appear on the horizon, making their way through the woods. Mike squints, trying to find a familiar face. They're dressed in black suits. He can just make out the silhouette of a military gun in the arms of one of the men . . .

Mike crouches down, and his knees hit the ground so fast that the impact sends pain shooting through his kneecaps, through the gash in his thigh. Max mirrors him, getting down on her hands and knees in the bed of dead leaves. The thick foliage and shrubbery provides perfect concealment, shielding them from view.

Mike holds his breath as they pass. He recognizes one of them, a man who was part of the group that went to investigate the other monster the day Lucas got hurt. Max shoots him a questioning look but keeps quiet, watching the men through the gaps in the leaves. They speak in quiet whispers, and their words are muffled so much that Mike cannot hear anything they're saying.

When they are out of sight, Mike rises to his feet, wincing as the muscles in his legs stiffen from crouching so long. Max raises her eyebrows, looking in the direction of the lab, where they were headed.

"What was that all about?"

"I don't know. Nothing good. Those are government guys." Mike shakes his head, drawing a breath. "Let's go."

They reach Mirkwood as the sun begins to sink. Max retrieves her skateboard from the bushes on the side of the road. Mike swings a leg over his bike. With Nancy at Indiana State and his mom's part-time job at the daycare center, he has limited access to a car. Today is one of those days.

Mike glances at Max.

"You're right."

"What?"

"You're right. We need a plan."

"Okay . . ."

Mike nods, mumbling to himself. He gets on his bike, taking off towards home. He glances over his shoulder. Max hesitates.

"You coming?"

. . .

Mike pounds on Dustin's door, impatient. Max hangs back, staring at her feet. Dustin answers the door, bag of chips in one hand, candy

bar in the other.

"Hey, Mike, what's going on . . ." He trails off when he sees Max. He ogles at her, tripping over his words.

"Max! Woah, hey, uh, w-what are you . . . uh . . ."

Mike suppresses a laugh, rolls his eyes.

"Can we come in?"

. . .

They sit on the floor in Dustin's room. He's blushing profusely, and making no effort to hide it. Mike tells him what happened at the lab, how they saw the government men. How El spoke to him through the Super Com. Dustin gets up and begins pacing the room, clearly agitated. Max leans against the sofa, picking at the carpet.

"I told Max the truth. About El and Will and the Upside Down." Mike says. Dustin's eyes widen in surprise.

"Yeah, he let me in on your weird secrets. Now I know you guys are badass monster killers."

"Well, yeah . . ." Dustin says, grinning sheepishly. Mike flicks him on the arm.

"We gotta tell Lucas. He's gonna flip."

"I know. Wait till he finds out we killed another monster. That's two in a week! Where do they even come from?"

Dustin shakes his head.

"I don't know. The Gate's closed. There's no way for them to get here."

"Unless they can open gates themselves, like the Demogorgon."

"Shit, I bet they can."

"If they can, then why didn't they before?"

Dustin bites his lip, shoving his hands deep inside his pockets.

"I don't know."

. . .

Mrs. Sinclair opens the door for them, directs them back to Lucas' room. They find him leaning against a tower of pillows, watching T.V. He grins when he sees them.

"Well, if isn't Frog Face and Toothless." Lucas says, cheerfully. Mike snorts. Lucas struggles to sit up, freezes when he catches sight of Max.

"Max? What're you doing here?"

Mike's gaze travels between the two.

"We need to talk."

Mike tells Lucas everything he told Dustin.

"And Max is here because . . .?" Lucas says, gazing at her.

"Because she knows about everything. And she saved me. She's one of us now."

23. Sea-Monkeys on Sycamore Street

El walks beside Will, taking each step tentatively. She's extremely weak. She holds her injured arm close to her body, eyes constantly scanning their surroundings. They take turns looking behind them for any sign of danger, a habit that has, by now, become second nature. In a place like this, it would be extremely beneficial to have a set of eyes in the back of your head. Unfortunately, humans are not gifted with such a thing. So they make do. They watch, they listen.

El thinks of their current predicament. Her arm feels like it weighs a thousand pounds. She no longer has any feeling in her fingers. Pus continues to leak from the puncture wounds, congealing with the dried blood. It's bloated, the skin shiny and pulled tight around the wound.

They left their hiding place in the basement to find water, resources. El's main priority is water. Her hunger pains have faded to a perpetual, dull ache in her gut. It's not a good sign.

Her tongue is dry, despite the dampness of their environment. She has frequent spells of dizziness. She struggles stringing coherent thoughts together. Both of them are severely dehydrated. The infection isn't helping. Her whole body aches.

She'd woken to a severe heat emanating from her skin. A fever, from the infection. Another item to add to the long list of things going terribly wrong.

Their lives are an endless string of side-effects.

They walk toward her house, not talking, each lost in their own thoughts. The primordial desires for water, food, and shelter block out almost everything else. Despite this, El is drowning in thoughts of home: her favorite rocking chair by the window, cigarette smoke and Sunday mornings. Mostly, she drowns in thoughts of Mike. His freckled face haunts her every waking thought. Once, she could've sworn she heard him, calling for her. It wasn't so much a mental nudge than it was an audible sound. Still, it could've been some dream or hallucination. Some side-effect of the fever. She can't be

sure.

He's distant, almost unreachable. She doesn't push herself to extend the mental link. Secretly, it's better. Whatever happens to her, happens inside his head. She doesn't waste time lying to herself. El knows the connection they share runs far deeper than she cares to admit. It's almost overwhelming. But he is the only thing keeping her from going completely, irrevocably insane.

They find the water bottles where they left them, downstairs. At least the plastic keeps it clean. She drinks like she hasn't seen water for days, which, she hasn't. Not really. Will takes it a little more slowly, warns her to do the same.

He's right. She is overcome with a sudden wave of nausea, races to the sink and vomits into it. Of course, there isn't much in her stomach. The vomit scalds her throat and makes her eyes water. She spits, washing it down with more water from the bottle.

"Told you." Will says. His voice is ragged, his eyes tired. He forces a smile, one she doesn't return. She doesn't have the strength.

Will sinks to his knees, leaning up against the cabinets. She follows him, stretching out on the ground. He looks at her through half-closed eyes.

"We need to get you outta here, Ellie."

El nods, swallowing hard. Her head throbs, her palms are clammy. Cold sweat clings to her skin, an effect of the fever.

"There's no point in waiting here to die." She whispers, taking a shaky breath. She runs her fingers up the length of her injured arm. Her shoulder, though it's better than it was before, gives a painful twinge. Tears well in her eyes, because she knows the truth. She is dying. She's going to die in here.

"We need to go back to the lab. If I can get to the rift, if I can open it, maybe . . . maybe we can get out of here . . ."

Will shakes his head, gritting his teeth.

"Can . . . can you make it that far?" He asks.

"Yes."

"Ellie . . ."

"I can do it, Will." She says, firmly. She meets his eyes. "I can do it."

. . .

It's slow going. Every step sets fire to her body. She is cloaked in sweat, struggling to catch her breath. She's dying. She knows, now.

If she can open the Gate, if she can use what little strength she has left to save Will, it'll all be worth it. She just has to make it there.

. . .

Hopper's tires scrape along the asphalt as he speeds down Sycamore Street, one hand on the wheel, the other hanging out the open window. Coffee spills over the edges of the mug in his cupholder. Impatiently, he fiddles with the radio. It's belligerent, fading in and out of static, occasionally belching out a song that he neither recognizes nor particularly enjoys.

His brakes groan as he pulls up along the sidewalk, outside of the Café where Jamie Reeves was recently employed. She hasn't been seen in three days. They found her car where she left it, right outside the Café. Reporters are getting anxious. People want answers.

More than once, The '83 Incident has been brought up in conversations, inquiries. The town hasn't forgotten the boy who came back to life. They're worried. Worried about the incident at the Palace, which, thankfully, they've swept under the rug. Worried that the vanishing of Jamie Reeves is somehow connected with the vanishing of Will Byers.

They're right.

He's managed to keep El and Will's predicament a secret, to everyone but their families. Otherwise, public tensions would be much, much worse. He can't deal with that right now. He can only take it one case

at a time. He needs to get those kids back from the Upside Down. He needs to bring them home.

Hopper swallows, thinking of the gloom, the darkness that stains everything in that place. He can only hope they're okay. Alive, at the very least.

He thinks of Terry Ives, who's fallen over the edge once already.

He thinks of Joyce. She can't hold on much longer.

Losing those kids would destroy her.

...

Hopper skirts the perimeter of the Café. With every inch he covers, every step, he grows more and more frustrated. The area around the Café offers no evidence, no clues. He curses himself, drumming his fingers impatiently on the handle of the sheathed pistol resting on his hip. Nothing is out of place.

Somebody moved her car. Hopper doesn't know who, doesn't really care. They'd already checked it for evidence, found nothing. She's just gone. Disappeared into thin air.

After the better part of an hour of wandering the surrounding area, he decides to call it quits. There's nothing to see, no sign of a struggle, nor a monster. No trace.

Hopper sighs, decides to venture inside the Café, returning the barista's friendly wave.

"Can I get you anything, Chief?"

Hopper nods.

"A glass of water."

"Of course. Anything else?"

Hopper begins to decline, catches sight of delicious, chocolate-chip muffin winking at him from inside the glass case of baked goods.

Hopper bites his lip, massaging his growling stomach.

"Yeah, a muffin."

The man nods, handing him the muffin wrapped in brown paper and a plastic cup.

"I'm here because of Jamie Reeves." Hopper tells him. The man nods, solemnly.

"Yeah. Everybody here's pretty shaken up." He says. Hopper runs his fingernail over the rough edges of the paper bag, mind running circles.

"Were you here, that night? Did you notice anything out of place?"

"No, I had the day off."

Hopper nods.

"Have you found anything yet? Do you have any leads . . . ?"

Hopper shakes his head.

"Well, good luck. I hope she's okay."

"I hope so, too."

Hopper makes his way over to a seat by the window leans back, suddenly becoming aware of his own exhaustion. His muscles are sore, his eyelids heavy. He tucks into his muffin, carefully unwrapping the brown paper. He takes a bite and chews slowly, lost in thought.

No trace. The complete lack of evidence is incredibly frustrating. He was expecting . . . well, something. Evidence of a struggle, maybe some of the foreign sludge and plant matter from the Upside Down. Her car was here. She couldn't have gone far, unless she got on a bus, or else hitch-hiked. The nearest bus station is nearly seven miles away. It's highly unlikely . . .

Hopper raises his glass to his lips, stiffens as something flickers in his

peripheral vision. He freezes, peering into the cup of ice water in his hand. There, at the bottom of his glass, tiny black specks are flitting about. He gazes at them, trying to make sense of them. They're tiny organisms, nearly microscopic. So small he can barely make them out. They remind him of the Sea Monkeys his science class hatched nearly fourth years ago . . .

As Hopper studies them, they become more and more alien to him. They are like nothing he has ever seen.

Hopper's stomach twists into a knot, and he reacts before he fully registers the implications of this. Glass in hand, he makes his way to the counter. The barista senses his distress, fidgets nervously.

"Is everything okay, Chief?"

"What? Yeah, everything's okay. I . . . uh . . . I need to make a phone call."

. . .

Hopper finds Callahan and Powell midway through an intense game of Rummy. Flo clicks her tongue disapprovingly, peering at him over the top of her glasses. Hopper storms past her, clutching the plastic cup with bloodless hands. Callahan and Powell mumble a greeting, not glancing up from their card game.

"My office." He growls, struggling to conceal the shaking in his hands, the fear. Callahan looks up, raising his eyebrows. Hopper nods, lip curling. "Now."

They stand up, file down the hallway. Hopper sets the cup carefully on his desk and drops into his chair with a groan, rubbing his temples. Callahan leans against the wall, looking concerned. Powell stands by the door, hands folded over his chest.

"What's going on, Chief?"

Hopper doesn't answer right away, folds his hands on his desk, whole body stiff. His head throbs, and terrible thoughts chase each other around his brain. He takes a moment to gather himself, and the truth begins to dawn on him. He connects the dots.

Will's slugs . . .

Will's slugs are alive, writhing and wriggling, when they leave his body. They are a product of the Upside Down. They've been going down drains, contaminating the town's sewage systems and water supply. They must reproduce. The organisms in the water . . . they're offspring. There must be twenty or thirty in this couple ounces of water alone. How many more are spread through the entire town? How many people have consumed these tiny, parasitic creatures?

Hopper lifts the lid of the cup, revealing the creatures to Callahan and Powell. They step forward, eyes roving over the cup. Callahan shoots Hopper a perplexed look.

"So . . . you're freaking out over . . . backwash?"

Hopper stares at him, incredulous.

"What? No! There are parasites in the water . . . tiny little animals swimming around in there. At first, I thought they could be Sea Monkeys or some other common water-dwelling creature, but they're not. They're . . . alien."

"And you're worried about this because . . . ?" Callahan says, slowly, looking bemused. Hopper could hit him.

"These things are contaminating the town's drinking water. This is dangerous. This could make people sick. And the stuff going on with Will . . ." Hopper trails off, glancing at the two officers as looks of comprehension, and panic, appear across their faces.

Few people know the truth about the Incident. Callahan and Powell are among the few. After El's kidnapping, after the Wheeler kid got shot, they blew the case open. And Hopper made the decision to confide in them. He trusts them, as comrades and friends.

"Hopper, this is serious." Powell says.

"No, really?" Hopper rolls his eyes, gives a sharp, manic laugh that is lacking any trace of humor.

"I already called made some phone calls. The city's going to send out

a public warning as soon as we know what we're up against. The labs, the government agencies, they want samples. I'm guessing they want to run tests." Hopper digs through his pockets his pack of cigarette, shoves one between his teeth. He attempts to light it, but his hands shake so badly . . . Wordlessly, Powell takes the lighter from his hands and holds it to the end of the cigarette. Hopper inhales,squeezing his shut to stop the room from spinning.

. . .

Will and El stand at the fence surround Hawkins National Laboratory. Will ventures through the fence first, head tilting left and right as he surveys their surroundings. El clammers through, clumsily, and the chainlink rips at her skin and clothing.

They approach the door, still hanging ajar. El sticks close to Will as they continue into the labyrinth of white tiled hallways and locked doors. Old memories torment her. She swears she can hear Papa's whisper, soft and dangerous all at once. Every time she so much as glances at the floor, the walls, she can see blood smeared across them. The velvet sea surrounding Mike as the life bled out of him. Benny's third eye. The blood of the people she has murdered.

Everything bleeds in her dreams.

They make their way slowly, pausing to watch, and listen. They search for danger in the semi-darkness, afraid to breathe, afraid to make a sound.

El, fever-stricken and weak, stumbles a few times, legs buckling under the weight of her body. She drags herself forward, gritting her teeth, letting Will help her to her feet when she falls. He's there to support her, to urge her forward. And she's grateful.

In the part of the lab concealed underground, they find the old water tank, the rift in the wall. It's sealed, just as they left it.

Hesitantly, El leaves Will's side and approaches the wall, feeling along the plant-covered tiles with her hand. She paces a five foot length of the wall, thinking, trying to muster up the strength to open it. Her heart throbs inside her skull. Her vision is spotty, and even

now, she can feel herself fading. She slumps against the wall, pressing her hand over her eyes.

To their left, a noise like shuffling feet echoes around the room. El's eyes snap open, and she turns her head in the direction of the sound. She cries out, more out of surprise than fear, as the shadowed form of a person steps out from behind the tank.

El watches, brain moving in slow motion, not daring to move or even breathe, as the shadow's fingers lock around Will's throat.

24. Catch-22

Mike keeps his eyes downcast as he walks through the halls of the high school. All day, he's been dodging questions. Questions about Will and Lucas. Questions about El. Their absence. He keeps his answers short, vague. Just enough to devoid his classmates of suspicion. He swallows the lump in his throat and hurries to get to his next class, avoiding any interaction with his peers. Because he can't deal with it.

Every corner he turns, every door that opens, he expects to see her. Her big, brown irises, her tired smile. Ready to throw herself into his arms, if just for a moment, because the bell's about to ring. And it will drag them into separate classes, each one watching the clock, suffering through every minute without the other. He never really thought about it before. He thinks about it all the time now. She is everything.

Joyce used to tease them about it. Hopper, too. And Nancy and Lucas and Dustin and pretty much everyone. He has an idea what they say when he's out of earshot, or behind closed doors.

Inseparable. Star-Crossed. Joined at the hip.

Words and phrases used by his friends and loved ones in their attempt to coin a term to his relationship with El.

They're right, sort of.

And it's more. More than he can begin to comprehend.

How deliciously impossible, to be so enamored, so in love with one.

At lunch, Dustin joins him, and later, Max. She sets her tray down on the table with a soft thud and drops into the chair beside Dustin. He grins at her, a blush spreading over his cheeks. Mike rolls his eyes.

Around the room, people are shooting them looks. Mike glances around. The other kids are curious. They crane their necks, like dogs scenting the wind. They sense a change in the social order of things.

The sight is almost amusing.

Max doesn't give so much as backward glance, tucking into her chocolate pudding with an air of nonchalance. Dustin continues to oggle at her.

Max and Dustin start chatting, and their friendly conversation turns into a heated discussion about the X-Men. Mike stops listening around the point they're arguing over whether Wolverine or the Hulk would win in a fight.

His consciousness wanders. Out of habit, he gives El a little mental push. He is met with no response, of course. He knows she's alive. He doesn't know how he knows this, exactly, he just does. Any other possibility is simply out of the question, beyond his comprehension. If he lost her . . . if he lost her the world would collapse and fall like a corpse at his feet.

He won't allow himself to think about it.

"Hey, faggots!"

Mike's train of thought derails. He glances up to see Troy sauntering over to their table. Mike nearly laughs out loud. He hasn't bothered them in years, wouldn't dare to even come near Mike if El was anywhere near.

Troy leans in close to Max. She fidgets in her seat, looking extremely uncomfortable.

"If it isn't my dear Little Red Riding Hood. I see Froggy's psycho girlfriend has brainwashed you into hanging out with them. What a perfect little freak show. Frogface. Fatso. Ginger. Midnight. Fairy. Psycho. Where is that little bitch, anyway?"

Mike's hands curl into fists, and blood rushes to his head.

"Lucky for you, home with the flu." Mike says, in a low, dangerous voice. "Or you'd be scared shitless right about now. Hell, you might even . . . pee yourself."

Troy pales, glances around at the eager onlookers.

"Fuck you, Wheeler. You're nothing without your little nosebleeding freak to save your ass." Troy growls, brows knit. Mike grits his teeth, trying to get a grip on his temper.

"I bet you can't take me, Wheeler. You're soft. You're a coward." Troy laughs, eyes alight, reveling in the look on Mike's face. He's testing the water, trying to get Mike to rise to the bait. Because all he's ever known is insecurity, self-loathing. Because torment is his only outlet.

"You're a freak."

Mike stands. He towers a full head above Troy. Mike is lanky and thin, but he is not weak. And definitely not as scrawny as he used to be. Troy blinks, steps back.

"Screw off, Troy." Mike says, loudly.

"No fucking way, Wheeler. An arm for an arm. She broke mine, I break yours."

Mike almost laughs.

"That was four years ago, Troy. Get over yourself."

Max stands, intervenes.

"C'mon, Mike. Let's just go. It's not worth it."

Mike's eyes flick over her face, lock on Troy. Suddenly, all the anger that's been bubbling so close to the surface leaves him. It's replaced with sudden, overwhelming exhaustion.

Mike nods, bends down to retrieve his backpack. He lets Max lead him away, with Dustin following close behind. Max spits in Troy's face as she passes. The crowd of people that have gathered around them erupt into fits of laughter. A couple of onlookers wolf-whistle.

"Bitch!" Troy yells, wiping his face. The look in his eyes is murderous.

In the hallway, Max turns to look at Mike. She quirks an eyebrow, looking awed and perplexed.

"What was all that about it?"

"Tigers don't change their stripes, or so I've heard." Mike shrugs, brushing a strand of hair out of his eyes. Max nods, rolling her eyes.

"And spineless little shitheads don't stop bitching, apparently."

Dustin laughs.

The three of them continue walking, down the hallway, conversation wandering. Mike takes a couple deep breaths, only half listening as Dustin reiterates the look on Troy's face after Max spit on him.

As they turn the corner, the sound of rapid footsteps reaches them. Mike looks up, surprised, as a teacher sprints past them. He turns the corner and takes off down the hall, towards the cafeteria. The three of them turn to stare, bewildered, after the man. Max opens her mouth to say something.

And then they hear the screams.

Without thinking, Mike takes off running. Down the hall, towards the cafeteria. He bursts through the double doors, trying to claw his way through the crowd gathered along the far walls. Max follows close behind him, and Dustin trails, breathing heavily. There, in the middle of the room, a kid is writhing on the floor. He's shrieking, clawing at thin air. Mike's stomach sinks.

It's a freshman, some kid he doesn't recognize. Mike can see the whites of his eyes. The skin starts to dissolve, taking on a grayish color and an odd, shiny quality . . .

A teacher is kneeling beside the kid, yelling and waving his arms. Another is gripping the phone on the wall with white knuckles, screaming into the receiver. The boy's muscles seize up, and a terrible scream cuts through the air. The teacher steps back, face turning several shades paler.

The kid climbs to his feet, arms outstretched. Like Will, he has transformed. Morphed into a terrifying, inhuman beast. An alien. A monster.

Around them, kids begin to scream. Some move toward the door, while others remain rooted to the spot, watching the monster with wide eyes. Max's lips move, but Mike doesn't seem to be hearing correctly. His ears ring, and the lights are suddenly too bright.

The monster leaps, knocking the teacher over. It's whistling, making those awful, yet familiar, sounds. It rips into the man's clothing. Scarlet stains blossom in the man's white, button down shirt.

Dustin is yelling, tugging on Mike's sleeve, pushing him towards the door. Mike's brain moves in slow motion. He can't seem to tear his eyes away from the man, from the black blood beginning to pool around the gashes in his skin.

Dustin kicks and shoves his way through the stampede of students forcing their way through the double doors. They break into a run. Behind them, another, higher-pitched scream tears through the air. The monster has found another victim.

Later, they will learn her name. Later, they will read about her death in newspaper, shiver at the memory of her last utterance. A final scream leaping from bloodied, frozen lips, a sound like breaking glass.

They run through the hallways of the high school, trying to put as much distance between themselves and the monster. The familiarity of the situation is almost laughable. Last time, they were running from the government men. He remembers El's panicked breath in his ear, the kiss still lingering on his lips.

Max pauses, wrenches open a door. It's a cramped supply closet. Mike doesn't think twice, shoves himself into the closet. Dustin follows them, closing the door behind them. It's pitch black, so dark Mike can't see his own hand when he holds it inches from his face.

"Do you think we're safe in here?" Dustin whispers, fearfully.

"I don't know." Mike says.

"Dustin, you're standing on my foot." Definitely Max's voice, coming from somewhere to the left.

"Oh, sorry."

"Oh my god, something's touching me!"

"Dustin, shut up."

There's a shuffling of feet, and a soft groan.

"Mike, is that you?"

"I'm over here."

"Wait, then who's . . ." There's a sharp intake of breath. "Guys, there's somebody else in here." Dustin says, in a panicked whisper.

"What? Hold on, let me find the light . . ."

More shuffling. The light above them flicks on. Mike winces at the sudden brightness, hand reaching up to shade his eyes. He looks around. Max and Dustin are huddled in the corner. And along the farthest wall, wedged between two overturned mop buckets and trembling from head to toe, is Troy. He glares at them. Max scoffs, tossing a lock of red hair over her shoulder.

"Look who decided to join the freak show." She says, smirking.

"Shut your fat mouth, Ginger. You'll get us all killed."

Max giggles. A deranged, wild glint grows in her eyes. Troy fidgets, uneasy. Mike shakes his head, finds himself enjoying Troy's obvious discomfort.

Several minutes drag by. They keep quiet. Mike shifts his weight, heart hammering inside his chest. He can't erase the screams from his head, can't comprehend how this could even be possible.

The cramped space is suffocating. He's sure they're using up all the oxygen in the room. And he'll die here. He has to get out . . . He watches the walls, half expecting them

to shrink, or to collapse in on them. He gasps, fighting for air, beginning to understand El's panic, her phobia of small spaces.

...

Mike found her in the Byers' coat closet. They'd been playing on Will's Atari system for hours, sitting on the floor in the living room. He wasn't aware her absence until he got up to get another soda from the fridge. That's when he noticed. And he knew.

El hadn't been herself that past week. She moved slowly, barely even talked. She was a pair of tired eyes and a painful, forced smile. He was kicking himself, angry for not bringing it up. Angry for not offering her a bit of comfort, a hand to hold. It was the PTSD, the nightmares. He couldn't have known she'd still be dealing with it in the years to come.

The nightmares never go away.

El was huddled between a stack of cardboard boxes and a broken vacuum cleaner. As soon as he caught sight of her, he knew. Something was terribly, awfully wrong. Her face was streaked with tears, and she shook violent, fingernails digging into the skin of her forearms. He remembers his lungs constricting. He remembers the sky shattering above them. He sank to his knees, reaching out for her. She shied away from his hand, refused to meet his eyes.

He could feel it, then. Her fear. The mental link was there, and, though she'd built barriers around herself, he could still feel her.

He tried talking. Soft words. They seemed to have some effect on her. Before he could really wrap his head around the situation, she'd reached out to him. And he was there with open arms. Her fingers clutched at fistfuls of his shirt. She melted in his arms.

The world dissolved, and all that existed were the terrible sobs that wracked her body and her effort to draw breath. And Mike was crying too, because he hated that feeling, that helplessness. He wanted to take the pain away, he wanted to make her better. And he didn't know how.

All of her bottled-up emotions, all the nightmares she'd been keeping to herself, exploded like a grenade that day. They were the shadows in that coat closet, and they danced inside his head.

Mike doesn't remember how long he sat on the floor, holding her as her tears soaked through his shirt. She was so fragile, so weak. She was shaking so badly . . .

It was a panic attack out of nowhere. A vision, a flashback. A nightmare, that sent her into that closet. He would later learn she did it as self-punishment. She did it to keep her demons at bay. Mike was angry, so angry, at Brenner for breaking her beyond repair. For brainwashing her into believing that she is a monster.

She's not. She's the farthest thing from it.

She's a promise.

And Mike will never stop hating the fact that she doesn't think so.

. . .

Mike opens door a crack, peering into the hallway. He can hear the distant wail of sirens. The hall is deserted, quiet. He steps out of the closet. Max catches his wrist.

"Is it safe?" She says, looking anxious.

Mike nods, looking up and down the hall.

"I think so."

She swallows nervously and emerges from their hiding place, followed by Dustin. Troy steps out of the closet, wringing his hands nervously, practically hiding behind Mike as they continue to survey the hall, listening for any sign of the monster.

Mike starts walking down the hall, picking up his pace, knowing it's safer to be outside rather than stuck in such a narrow place with no place to run . . .

He turns the corner and almost collides head-on with the monster. It turns, snorting, scenting the air. Mike yells, scrambling backward. Max screams, and Dustin grabs her arm, pulling her back. The monster lunges, catching Mike's upper arm with its claws. He yells in pain, trying to twist out of its grasp. He knows nothing but the beat

of his heart, his own fear.

The monster throws him against a glass trophy case. Mike crashes through the glass, screaming as multiple shards imbed themselves in his body. Every nerve is set on fire. Blood begins to leak from the cuts in his hands, his cheeks. He can taste it.

The monster screams, tries to get its jaws around Mike's neck. Two gunshots pierce the air. The monster screams, releasing its grip on Mike. He falls to the ground, landing amongst the broken glass. A third shot explodes, makes its mark. The monster screams, falls to the floor in a heap.

Dustin is yelling, and Max clings to his arm, looking as if she's about to pass out. Troy is huddled against the opposite wall, hands clamped over his ears. Mike tries to move, winces as the glass buried beneath his skin twinges painfully.

A man, dressed in a suit and tie, runs toward him and holds out his hand in an attempt to halt Mike in his struggle to stand up. He says something, but Mike's ears are still ringing from the gunfire and he doesn't quite catch it. Two more men follow him, guns slung over their shoulders, looking pale and frightened.

Mike can't take his eyes off the monster, knowing it's not really a monster at all but a fourteen-year-old kid. Everything inside him screams. He's in shock, though. And all he's really thinking about is the face of that kid. He was somebody's child, somebody's friend.

Now, he's dead.

"That was a kid!" Mike yells. Tears spring in his eyes, and he doesn't wipe them away. He's screaming his head off, and he can't seem to stop the words that fall from his tongue, fighting their way past the awful lump in his throat.

"That was a kid! A freshman. You killed him. You . . . you k-killed him . . ." Mike is sobbing now, unwilling and unable to wrap his head around the barbarity of the situation.

"Mike . . ." Dustin says.

"No. No, you killed him. He couldn't control it, and now he's dead . ." Mike can't control himself. His emotions are scattered. Adrenaline courses through his body, adding to his deliriousness. He breaks down.

His shoulders shake, and fat tears roll down his cheeks. Everything he's been through, these past few months. All the emotional trauma, the fear, has pushed him to this point.

The man in the suit swallows, looking stricken, pale. One of his comrades says something, looking at the monster's corpse fearfully. Another, harried man is yelling into his radio. Minutes later, a team of paramedics burst through the doors at the end of the hallway.

They get Mike onto a stretcher. He's crossed some line of hysteria. They have to wrestle him into the restraints on the rolling stretcher. They give him some medication, more to calm him down than anything. He struggles to stay awake as the medicine begins to take control of his body. Max and Dustin gaze worriedly at him as he is carted away from the scene.

The hallway seems oddly dim, and his mind is fuzzy. He feels light, like he could float away. He melts, slips into a soft, foggy darkness.

25. Secrets, Lies, and Loose Threads

Hopper's heart hammers inside his chest. He arrives on the scene, flanked by Powell. Several ambulances and a fire truck are parked outside, on the sloping grass lawn in front of the school. He bursts from the car and sprints toward the gymnasium, where a few of his comrades are already on the scene. He approaches Callahan and Davis, spit flying from his lips as he shouts at them. Callahan holds up his hands, trying to calm him. Hopper shakes his head, angry and afraid, and pushes past him.

In the gym, several students are seated in clumps on the floor. Some whisper to one another, heads bowed. Some are pale, stricken. Other kids glance around; their teary eyes flick anxiously across the room. Teachers are milling around, equally tense. A group of staff huddle in a group, talking to two men wearing black suits. A woman is slumped against the wall, shoulders shaking as she sobs into a handkerchief. Some teachers are wandering among the students, checking for wounds or reassuring those in that took the trauma especially hard.

Hopper rubs his hand over his face, taking a breath. Callahan approaches him, raises his eyebrows.

"Injuries?"

"Three dead. A teacher, two students." Hopper sighs, squeezes his eyes shut as the ground lurches beneath his feet. A terrible weight settles on his chest.

"Apart from that, minor injuries. A couple scrapes and bruises, an anxiety attack. Some kid was just taken to the hospital. I don't know how serious the injuries were . . ."

"Who?"

"Sorry...?"

"Who's the kid? The one they took the the hospital . . ."

Officer Davis ruffles through a notepad. He clicks his pen, meeting

Hopper's eyes.

"Michael Wheeler."

Hopper's breath catches in his throat.

"What?"

"They took Michael Wheeler to the hospital. He sustained injuries from debris and broken glass, apparently. And . . ." Davis trails off, blinking at Hopper.

"You alright, Chief?"

Hopper ignores him. He spits on the ground, pulls out his pack of cigarettes with shaking fingers.

"And the monster? What did they do with it?"

"It's still in the school, I think." Callahan says. He pauses, looking weary.

"Chief, there's something you need to know."

Hopper fixes him with a sharp glare, shoves a cigarette between his teeth.

"Spit it out."

Callahan launches into the details of the incident. The monster was actually a kid, a fourteen-year-old boy by the name of Aaron McCaffrey. Two teachers were witnesses to this, not to mention several hundred students. He'd fallen under the influence of terrible seizures and transformed into a mysterious, paranormal creature. He murdered two people before he was shot and killed.

Hopper blinks, lights suddenly too bright. Everything begins to fall into place. Will . . . the pestilence . . . the larvae in the water . . . the monsters . . .

Without another word, Hopper turns and begins pushes his way through the crowd of anxious parents and teachers. Callahan and

Davis follow him as he clambers up the front steps and continues on into the main hallway of the high school.

He enters the cafeteria and finds several paramedics bent over a body. A sheet has been thrown over it, the head covered. A few feet away, another, significantly smaller form lies among a few overturned tables and chairs.

"Tim Holloway." One of the EMTs tells him, dully. She makes a note on her clipboard, then points points to the smaller body. "Julia Martin. She was fifteen years old."

"Oh, god." He moans, shaking his head. His throat constricts, and he's suddenly dizzy. Wordlessly, the paramedics lift the girl's body onto a stretcher and wheel her away.

Hopper, Callahan, and Davis leave the cafeteria, make their way down the hallway. At the end of the hall, several men are at work. The boy, the monster, has been wrapped in a plastic bag. Men in black suits are talking into their radio devices, or else scribbling notes on a clipboard. Some of them are even dressed in hazmat suits. It's terribly familiar. Two soldiers in uniform stand by the doorway, guns resting at their soldiers. Hopper approaches the men. They hold up their hands, moving to block his path.

"Sorry, sir. This area is restricted."

Hopper regards them with an unruffled air and a steady gaze. The corners of his mouth twitch. He holds out his hand, and the soldier shakes it.

"Jim Hopper. Chief Jim Hopper. And this is Officer Callahan and Officer Davis." Hopper gestures to his partners. The soldier nods, politely. "Listen, er . . ."

"Richey Dawson." The soldier says.

"Mr. Dawson," Hopper begins. "I'm the Chief of Police here in Hawkins. It's my responsibility to investigate what happened here." He pauses, shifts his weight. "I'm not stupid. I know that . . . that thing you're bagging up, you're taking it back to experiment on it. I

know it's responsible for the deaths of two people. But I also know it was a kid, a fourteen-year-old boy. And I know that he's got a family. A family that will want a body to bury." Hopper pauses. Little creases appear on Dawson's brow as he regards Hopper. He says nothing, and the Chief continues.

"And I've got reporters who have the unfortunate task of fabricating a story that will keep the public from collapsing into total chaos. They want answers." He sighs. "So, Mr. Dawson, I need to know the facts. And I can only do that if I'm allowed to see that boy." Hopper shoves his hands in his pockets and glances at the floor, briefly. He lifts his eyes, meeting the soldier's anxious gaze.

"Do me a favor, let me get past. Let me go back there so I can tell Aaron McCaffrey's family that their son is dead."

. . .

Hopper slams the door, fuming. He takes a few steps, running a hand over the stubble on his face. Callahan and Davis burst out of the door, following him across the parking lot. They call out, but Hopper ignores them. Frustration and anger courses through him, making him blind to any sense or reason . . .

They wouldn't let him past. It's all happening again, the secrecy, the lies. And he won't stand for it.

Across the campus, ambulance lights continue to flash, reflecting oceans of red and blue across the gym's brick walls.

"Hopper, wait . . ."

He stops, stares at the asphalt under his feet.

Davis lays a hand on his shoulder. Hopper shakes his head, a wry smile stretching across his face. He shrugs off Davis' attempt at consolation.

"Those government bastards . . ." He growls. "They're like Brenner's people. They're trying to keep it under wraps, and people are going to die. They killed someone." Hopper fidgets, tugging at the collar of his shirt. His mind is racing.

The parasites, in an ordinary Cafe's drinking water.

Will's sickness. The slugs.

Puzzle pieces, all disorganized. And now a kid turned into a fucking monster, just like Will does.

His head throbs as he struggles to comprehend it. And Jamie Reeves is still missing.

This morning, he sent the contaminated water samples to the labs. He should be receiving a call at any moment . . .

And then there's the government people to deal with. The men in black suits. The ones who wouldn't let him past, who denied his attempts to investigate. He bites back the bitter taste in his mouth. People don't get in the way of his job without paying sorely for it . . .

He doesn't trust them. Not after MK Ultra. Not after El.

These aren't Brenner's people. But they seem to be following the same rule book. They're two sides of the same coin, and he doesn't trust them.

His anger gives way to cold, aching fear.

He turns to his officers, biting his lip.

"I don't think we can stop this from reaching the public. Not with so many witnesses," Hopper trails off. He looks across the campus, watching the procession of cars pull in or out of the parking lot. Parents are beginning to arrive, picking up their kids. He gives a sharp laugh.

"This is going to get out. And it's gonna scare people. It's gonna make our lives hell."

Callahan clicks his tongue, shifting uneasily.

"What are we gonna do?"

"You are gonna get back to the station. Tell Flo what's going on, and

write up a few reports. Detailed. I want everything that happened here, today, recorded and on file. If anybody questions you, try to keep them calm and under control until I can figure out how to break the story to the public."

"And what about you, Chief? You look like hell. You should rest . . ."
Davis says.

Hopper shakes his head, cutting him off.

"No. I've got an errand to run."

. . .

Mary McCaffrey answers the door. She is Aaron's mother. The woman is tall and thin, with dark, curly hair and grey eyes. She blinks at him, surprised, mouth slightly agape. Hopper's heart climbs into his throat.

It's the worst part of the job. Too often, he has been the bearer of bad news. Too often, he has watched the light die in a person's eyes when they learn about the death of a family member, a loved one. He's lost a kid, himself. He knows the feeling. He knows that nobody deserves to go through it.

He supposes that's why he tried so hard to save Will, why he cares so much about the girl they call Eleven . . .

"Mr. Hopper!" She exclaims. "I was just about to go down to the school, uh, can I help you?"

Hopper swallows, stares at his feet.

"Ms. McCaffrey, I think it would be best if I come inside."

. . .

Aaron McCaffrey is the third victim of many, to come. A missed call awaits Hopper, back at the station. The Pestilence is awakening. And when it begins to spread, when the news reaches the small town of Hawkins, Indiana, the world will turn upside down.

. . .

He dreams of El. He's back in the school, wandering the bright hallways. He catches glimpses of her as she turns corners, whipping out of sight. He breaks into a run, chasing her, trying to reach her, but she dances out of his reach. She's teasing him. Her laughter floats through the air, and the sound is fractured, faraway. He wakes with a jolt, muscles rigid, her name on his lips and tears in his eyes.

Mike blinks, taking in the clean, white walls and the sharp scent of disinfectant. He's in the hospital. Again.

He sits up, looking wildly around. Dustin and Max glance up, and wide smiles spread across their faces. They rush to his bedside.

"Whattimeisit?" Mike says, groggily. His tongue feels too big, his limbs too heavy.

"Five-thirty. You've been asleep for forever, man. We were getting worried."

"Only a couple hours!" Max says, snorting. "How do you feel?"

"Like I got hit by a bus."

"Oh, please. You barely even got hurt." Max says, sarcastically, though her anxious expression betrays her air of nonchalance.

Mike struggles to lift his arm, hand reaching for a small cut over his right eye. Both of his hands are heavily bandaged.

"The glass cut you up pretty bad. They had to give you stitches for some of the cuts. Your mom's filling out the paperwork now. They said they'd release you as soon as you woke up. I guess they're not too worried about you." Max says. Mike nods, happy to be leaving this place.

"What happened . . . at the school?" He says, taking a breath. The memory is still hauntingly fresh in his mind. He can still hear the screams . . .

Max blinks, looking solemn.

"Mr. Holloway is dead. He was a Biology teacher. A Sophomore girl, Julia Martin, also died. And the freshman . . . the kid that turned into a monster. Well, you know . . ." She trails off, looking uncomfortable. Mike sighs, leaning back against the pillow.

Today, a kid turned into a monster, a mindless killing machine. Like Will. It's exactly what happens to Will. Mike doesn't understand it. How can that be possible?

The door opens, and a nurse steps inside, closely followed by Mrs. Wheeler.

"Oh, Mike. Honey . . ." Mrs. Wheeler cries, rushing to pull her son into a hug. Dustin and Max step back, giving them space. The nurse clicks her pen, ruffles through some papers.

"Okay, Mr. Wheeler, I think you're good to go. I'll go sign you out." She gives them a small smile and leaves the room.

Outside, the sun is sinking. The sky is streaked orange and gold, dotted with wispy clouds. Mike bites his tongue, trying to ignore the ache that tears through him with every step. The slightest movement causes the stitches to twinge painfully. Dustin and Max go their separate way, bidding him a hasty goodbye before heading towards Dustin's car.

Mike's mom drives him home, white-knuckling the steering wheel, glancing concernedly at him every few minutes. Mike ignores her. He stares out the window, leaning his cheek against his hand.

They arrive home in mere minutes. Mike scrambles up the walk, chewing on the inside of cheek. His thoughts are still muddled. He's exhausted, and all he really wants to do is sleep. He opens the door and steps over the threshold with a groan.

He hears a little scream and a clatter of footsteps, and Nancy launches herself into his arms. He stumbles back, surprised. She's crying. Her shoulders shake as she clings to him.

"I'm so sorry, Mike. I'm so sorry . . ." She says it, over and over again, through the tears.

And Mike starts to cry, too. Because, somehow, Nancy understands better than anyone.

He lets himself shatter, because he's been strong for too long.

A/N: First, a big thank you to everyone who has been kind enough to stick with this story. It has grown from what I estimated to be about a 20K piece to a full-sized work. With finals week rapidly approaching, I regret to announce that I am putting this story on temporary hiatus. I will return within two weeks or so with more chapters. I still have big plans for this story, so keep checking for email notifications. Thank you to anyone who left a review. As always, critiques and feedback are greatly appreciated. If you haven't yet, leave me a review and tell me what you think!

26. Numbers

A/N: I'm back! I apologize for such long hiatus. I'll be posting normally again. Keep checking for email notifications, and leave a review!

El isn't aware of the frantic scream that bursts from her mouth. She doesn't think. She reacts, throwing her uninjured arm out in front of her. The woman is launched backward, pinned against the water tank. She cries out, struggling against El's telekinesis. But El is weak. She cannot hold on for much longer.

A sudden, violent wave of nausea overcomes her. She feels a burst of warmth on her upper lip and in her ears. She sinks to her knees. Her vision is fuzzy, and she can't clear the ringing in her ears. The woman stumbles forward as El's grip on her releases.

A second, shorter, silhouette darts out from the shadows. It's a child, probably no older than eight. A boy. Thin and gaunt, with hair that could be blonde if it weren't coated in grime.

"Sev!" The woman yells. "No."

The boy stops, glances between the woman and El, looking frightened. Will gets up, rushes to El's side. El reaches out to him, unsteady and shaking, the fever-induced delirium and dizziness taking over. She can't hear, can't think straight.

A couple yards away, the boy is kneeling beside the woman. He clutches her hand. The woman sits up, rubbing her elbow. She, too, is extremely thin. Her hair is matted, and her eyes are dark and dull. Haunted. She licks her cracked lips, staring at them with unnerving intensity. She begins to point frantically at El, takes a tentative step forward.

"Get back!" Will yells, angry. Afraid. The woman shakes her head.

"No." She points at El. "She is one of us."

"What? Who . . . who are you?" Will says. He keeps one hand on El's shoulder, another held out in front of him. El lays her head in her hands, trying to ease the dizziness.

The woman continues to gesture and point.

"She is one of us. She's marked."

"What?"

The woman takes another step towards them, crouches beside El. Slowly, she reaches out and takes El's hand, exposing her wrist. The woman gives a small smile, meeting Will's gaze. There's a tinge of sorrow in her eyes. She holds out her own wrist.

There, tattooed along the inside of her slender forearm, is the number 006.

Six.

Will's breath catches in his throat as the truth dawns on him. El's eyes fall on the tattoo, and her eyes fill with tears.

Six reaches out, pats her shoulder gently. She gestures to herself.

"Six."

El nods, a ghost of a smile lingering on her ashen face.

"El," she says, weakly. "Short for Eleven."

. . .

He carries El in his arms. She cries out, mumbling something unintelligible, fist curling into the fabric of his shirt. She has succumbed to the fever, sunk under the waves of unconsciousness. And Will's cursing himself and cursing the universe and everything under the sun. A terrible pain grows in his chest as he gazes down at El's fragile form. She's too thin, too pale. He tries not to think the infection coursing through her veins, the feverish nightmares clouding her consciousness.

A hard knot builds in his throat, and he can feel the beginnings of tears. Furiously, he blinks them away.

Six leads him up a short staircase and through a narrow hallway. She pushes open a door that leads into a small room. It's like a prison cell, with a single bed and low ceilings, a toilet in the corner.

A scuffle in the corner brings his attention to another person, a teenage girl. He steps back, yelping in surprise. Six lays a hand on his shoulder, taps her finger on her lips. The girl steps toward them, gazing at Will curiously. He forces a smile, staring at her.

Six walks forward and takes the girl's hand, gesturing towards Will and El.

"Eleven." The woman says, pointing towards El. The teenage girl's eyes widen, a flicker of recognition crosses her face.

The girl's eyes flicker across their faces. She points to herself, lifting her wrist. The tattered sleeve of her shirt slips a few inches, revealing the number . . .

"Nine." She says. Her voice wavers like an out-of-tune instrument, strangled and rough from inuse.

Six gestures to the young boy, who stands beside her, thin arms encircling her middle.

"Seven."

The boy peers shyly at them from the folds of her clothing. He gives them a small, hesitant smile.

Will gestures toward himself.

"I'm Will."

"Will." Nine echoes. Her eyes are trained on him, her gaze burning into him so intensely he has to fight the urge to look away. She's cautious and unsure, yet curious.

"Eleven is not well." Six says. She lays a hand on El's forehead,

frowning.

"Yeah, she's sick." Will says.

"Dying." Six says, simply. Will's stomach twists into a knot.

Six gestures to the bed. Though it's still covered in vines and slime, it's better than the floor. He lays her on the mattress, gently. Her brow furrows and her fingers tighten around his arm. He gives her hand a reassuring squeeze. She mumbles something, but he can't quite make it out. A product of the delirium, he supposes.

"Can you help her?" Will asks. There's a note of helplessness in his voice. Six shakes her head. Will's heart sinks.

"Do you have food? Water?"

"Yes." Nine steps forward, touches his arm. "Come with me."

Will glances at El, hesitant to leave her. He's convinced they can be trusted, though. If they really wanted to hurt them, wouldn't they just leave El to die? When they attacked, they were acting defensively, he's sure.

Nine leads him through a series of shadowed corridors, moving swiftly, constantly glancing over her shoulder. Her head turns toward the faintest noise. She's like a wild animal. Prey. Constantly alert and surveying the surroundings for any sign of danger. Will struggles to keep up. His breath comes in short, wheezing gasps. The toxicity in the air, no doubt, plays a part. Dehydration and hunger, too, have certainly taken a toll on his body.

"You're part of MK Ultra. You're like El." Will says, tentatively. It's not a question. Nine bobs her head, barely even looking in his direction.

"Do you know Dr. Brenner?"

Nine freezes, turns around to glare at him.

"Bad."

"You do know him!"

"He is a bad man." She says, shortly, continuing through the hallway. She wheezes when she breathes, and her voice is raspy and weak. It probably has to do with the toxicity in the air.

"He's dead." Will tells her. She cocks her head, expression brightening considerably. Her mouth breaks into a wide, manic grin.

"Dead?"

"Yeah, he's dead. He was killed by a monster." Will says.

"Did you escape? Did he put you here? Where you a prisoner?" Will says, eagerly, his curiosity trumping any previous attempt to keep from frightening or overwhelming her.

Nine shakes her head.

"He kept me here, in the lab. He tried . . ." She swallows, shakes her head again, as if trying to clear it.

"He tried to . . . make me do things. Bad things. I couldn't . . . I wasn't strong enough. I got sick . . . I got lost."

"You got lost? Here? In the Upside Down?"

Nine shakes her head, leads him through a door and into a narrow staircase.

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"Where were you? When you got lost, I mean . . ."

"A dark place. Darker than here. Lonely. There's water, and voices . . ."

"There's a place darker than here?"

Nine nods, chewing on her lip. She pauses, gazing at him.

"Eleven. I know . . . I saw her . . . before, in the lab . . ." Nine cups her hands over her mouth, and her eyes fill with tears.

"She was the strongest . . . Dr. Brenner liked her the best. The rest of us . . . he only wanted to get rid of us." She sniffs, wipes her nose. "She's strong. Too strong. We came here when she . . . when made the hole. She broke the barrier. "

"Barrier? You mean the Gate?"

Nine shrugs.

"You came here when she opened it? How?"

"I was in the dark place with water. There's water around your feet. Six calls it the In Between." She says, gravely. "I was there for a long time. And I never slept. I couldn't sleep, I was awake. Like I was stuck in a dream that never ended." She stops walking, leaning against the wall. She presses a hand against her forehead, then let's it fall to her side, meeting his eyes. "There was no food or water, but It didn't matter. I wasn't hungry or thirsty. I don't know how long I was there. It was a long time. And I heard screaming. A terrible scream. . ." Nine trails off, and she sniffs, hand covering her mouth.

"It was her." She says, voice muffled through her fingers.

"El? El was screaming?"

Nine nods, tearful.

"Yes. She was screaming and then I started to feel different, hungry and tired. Like I had woken up from a long sleep. Like I wasn't real and then I was again . . . I don't know . . ."

She purses her lips, wiping her eyes.

"What happened?" Will urges her, anxiously.

Nine doesn't answer. A long stretch of silence lingers between them. A misty look stretches across her eyes. She presses her fingers over her eyelids, and her body grows rigid and stiff.

"Nine?" Will says, unsure. The word feels strange on his tongue.

"Nine . . ."

. . .

Papa. He always wanted to be called Papa. It was the first lesson she learned. He was Papa. He was Only Papa. Not Dr. Brenner, which was the name stitched across the shoulder of that perfectly pressed, white lab coat. Papa. He was Papa. She was Nine.

There were other lessons. She learned to recognize the Enemy, men dressed in dark clothes or finely tailored suits. Men who spoke in strange tongues. Men she only saw in photographs, or in that big black abyss Six calls the In Between.

Almost every day, Papa made her complete various jobs. Reading emotions from voice recordings, or actual volunteers. Invading the minds of those foreign men. When he asked her to crush a bright aluminum can with the words *Coca-Cola* printed on the front, she couldn't do it. She couldn't, and he sent her to the Room.

The next day, she tried again. And again, she failed. She couldn't crush the can without touching it. She couldn't, for the life of her, understand why he expected her to. It just wasn't possible.

She knew there were others. She never saw them, but she knew they were could feel them. And she knew Papa had a favorite. Nine was not his favorite. She wasn't even liked. She was expendable. He reminded her every day.

It made her competitive. It made her thirsty for his approval, his praise. His praise was seldom given and extremely difficult to earn. She would push herself over the edge before she heard it even once in her life.

And she hated the Favorite. She hated the one called Eleven.

He told her she was special. He told her the emotions she felt, the voices she heard, the ones that weren't her own . . . he told her it was a gift. Another sense. He told her normal people didn't feel those things. Normal people didn't hear the voices.

She found herself wishing she was normal. She found herself trying to block out the voices. The more she tried, the louder they became. Sometimes, they talked over one another in an overwhelming frenzy. Some of them were foreign tongues. Some of them were kind. Some of them were helpless, small voices, like the voices of tortured children. Most of them screamed.

Soon, she stopped hearing the voices. They became a dull ache in her head. And she started talking to herself. She argued with herself. The voices played tricks on her, then disappeared altogether. She could feel herself descending into insanity. She couldn't stop it.

And Papa sent her to the Room for good.

There, it's quiet. It's dark. It's cold.

There, she woke up In Between.

It was a dream. A long dream, with no discernable beginning or end. She wasn't hungry, wasn't aware of time or her own body or anything but voices and the cool water around her ankles and the deep blackness. And she was *floating*.

Then the screaming. A thousand voices screaming in a cacophony of pain and fear. And one voice, stronger than the rest. Eleven.

And she woke, still in the dark, no longer floating but alive and aware. She got up, looking around, feeling her way through the dark. The water around her feet sloshed up, licking the backs of her legs as she stumbled forward. She was like a wild animal, tired and hungry and disoriented.

She came across the rift in mere minutes. It was like a rip in fabric. The rift was moving, wavering, like a fluttering sheet on a clothesline. The darkness was broken open, letting a thin slice of grey light through. The first light she'd seen in months.

Operating on nothing but the most basic, primitive instinct, she climbed through it.

And the world turned Upside Down.

. . .

"I-I saw a l-light. I saw a little bit of light and I started to walk toward it. But it was hard because I was so tired. And when I got to it, it was like a tear. A crack in all the darkness. And I . . . I crawled through it. That's how I got here, to this place. I crawled through the tear and came here." She looks around wistfully, lost in the memory.

"What about the others? When did they come here?"

"The same time. It took me a few days to find them. I was lost . . . But they all heard the screaming, they all found a rift in the darkness."

Will's head reels. He takes a breath, trying to piece it together.

"How long have you been here?"

Nine looks at him, cocks her head.

"I don't know. The days, they're blurry. Since the tear opened."

Will's breath gets stuck halfway up his throat. The tear is the Gate, and the Gate opened for the first time nearly four years ago.

"That's four years. You've been here for four years?" His voice softens. "How did you survive?"

"Find food, took from houses in the town . . ."

"After all this time . . ."

Nine pushes open another door, leading him into a small room. It's like a storage space. Discarded furniture and machinery is stacked along the far wall.

"Food." She says, happily, removing a loose tile in the floor. Wedged the tiny space, there's a stash of snacks. Everything is wrapped, or else canned. Nine takes picks up a few energy bars, a can of beans, holds it out to him. He takes it eagerly, almost dizzy at the sight of it. He can't remember the last thing he ate.

She nods, smiling. She turns her back on him, crosses the room and

begins rummaging through an old filing drawer. She hands him a water bottle, takes a few more into her arms.

"Go back, bring food to the others." She says, shortly. He nods, letting her take the lead. They retrace their steps.

Will finds El in the same state, unconscious, mumbling unintelligibly. Seven, the younger boy, sits on the edge of the bed, peering at her curiously.

Six hurries forward, taking some of the canned goods from his hands. She opens one of the wrapped bars and takes a bite, smiling contentedly. She doesn't pause for breath as she wolfs it down, a primitive, hungry glint in her eyes. She is reminiscent of starved, wild animal. Nine crosses the room, holds out a can for Seven. He opens it, shovels the cold beans into his mouth with his fingers.

Will can't stop looking at the kid's fingernails. They're extremely long, grimy. He glances around at the three of them. They are all extremely dirty, covered in plant matter and slime. Their faces are gaunt, almost skeletal, with eyes that are sunken far into their skulls. Their lips are cracked, their skin so pale that Will is convinced he can see every single vein in their bodies. Their hair is long and matted, clothes tattered.

Six wears a hospital gown, but it has been cut short to resemble a t-shirt. She wears a thick, wool sweater over it, and sweat pants several sizes too large, Two pairs of socks on each foot. No shoes. Nine and Seven, also, are laden in mismatched, overlarge clothes. Clothes they probably found in the deserted houses in town.

Will stares at the torn, dirty hospital gown. He can't tear his eyes away.

After he returned from the Upside Down, his friends, Hopper, they told him about the girl called Eleven. To them, she was real. To him, she was a fragmented memory, a hallucination. He met her in the Upside Down, as he was clinging to life. After he got out of that place, he couldn't be sure she even existed. Luckily, he had their side of the story, their fond memories of her.

Dustin and Lucas reiterated her best moments, the moments she was nothing short of a superhero to them. With Mike, he tread more carefully. It was obvious she meant more to him than the others. As time went on, Mike gave him more of her to hold on to. Bits and pieces. He gave Will small details, like the color of her eyes or her fondness for eggos.

Hopper gave him the facts. He told Will about Terry Ives' involvement in MK Ultra, about Dr. Brenner and El's imprisonment in the lab. For Will, this part of the story was the hardest to swallow. And he knows about the hospital gowns. Later, in '84, when they found El and Mike in the Exploratorium, they were dressed in hospital gowns, too.

Right now, all he can think about are the gowns and that bastard, Dr. Brenner. El was lucky enough to escape. But these people, who know nothing but a life of darkness, who live by the numbers etched into their skin . . .

These people weren't so lucky.

He shakes his head, trying to clear it. Nine tugs on the sleeve of his sweatshirt, offers him a can of beef stew. He accepts, gratefully, and settles himself beside Seven.

Seven chews slowly, gazing at him. Will offers the kid a small smile.

Suddenly, El's whole body seizes up. She screams. Will jumps to his feet, rushing to her bedside. She's kicking and clawing, fighting the demons in her head.

"El? El, can you hear me?"

"Mike?" She says, breath catching in her throat. Her hand reaches out. Will shakes her shoulder.

"El, it's me. It's Will. Can you hear me?"

El's breathing slows, and her eyes flutter open. She squints at them, fingers curling into the sheets. She struggles for air.

"Will."

"Hey, El, how do you feel?"

She blinks, touches the wound on her arm tentatively.

"I'm alright." She says, groggily, though she certainly doesn't look it.

"Eat." Six says, brandishing a soup can in front of her. Slowly, El takes it. Her fingers shake, and the can crashes to floor. Seven dives to the floor to retrieve it, offers it to El with a tentative smile. Will takes it from the boy's hands, holds it out to El. She starts to scoop some into her mouth. Soon, it becomes evident that she can't even hold her head up. Not for every long, at least.

A heavy weight settles in the pit of his stomach as he watches her struggle with the soup can. He's struck by her fragility. She used to be so strong . . .

Now, she's fading away.

Seven rushes across the room and picks up a water bottle, trots back to her bedside. Will uncaps it and holds it to her lips. She drinks, gulping it down.

"No too fast, alright? It'll make you sick." He warns. She nods, slows down a bit. Water dribbles down her chin, and she doesn't bother to wipe it away. Her eyelids flutter, and she slumps back against the mattress.

"El?" He says. She doesn't give him any reply, closes her eyes.

He turns, swallowing hard. Six gazes at him solemnly. He says her name again, but it's futile. She's gone, slipped into unconsciousness once again.

And the world is falling apart.

27. Selfless

Mike leans forward in the La-Z-Boy, elbows on his knees, fingers tracing the bandages on his hands. Nancy sits beside him, rigid, on the sofa. Her hands shake, and her eyes are red from crying. Their parents and Holly had long retired to bed, leaving the two older siblings to themselves. The house is dark, save for one, dim lamp that flickers occasionally. Mike watches it, mind racing. A heavy silence hangs between them, punctuated only by Nancy's occasional sniffles.

El's disappearance hit her hard.

Nancy had grown to love El like a sister. Over the years, they'd become extremely close. Whenever the boys got particularly annoying, El would wander upstairs to Nancy's room. Nancy would show her pictures, or else tell her stories. El would listen, grinning. When her hair grew long enough, Nancy taught her how to plait it and style it. She remembers El's first Christmas, which she spent with them. She remembers the light in her eyes, the childish wonder.

Nancy remembers teaching El how to read, going through endless stacks of flashcards with her in preparation of her first year of school. The fifteen-year-old fought tooth and nail to pass the exam that would admit her into the public school system. Nancy remembers the day she finally did go to school, hand in hand with Mike, wearing the widest of smiles. And she remembers the hours El spent helping Nancy pack for her freshman year of college. She remembers El's gentle encouragement.

That day, it struck Nancy how much she'd grown over such a short time, how she'd matured.

She had a newfound confidence about her, a strength with which she stood. She was no longer a science experiment or even a little girl. She'd grown into a young woman, and a force to be reckoned with. With Mike by her side, she was unstoppable. And Nancy couldn't have been prouder.

All this runs through her head as she gazes at her brother, looking so fragile, so shattered. Reduced to a ghost, a shell of a person. And her

heart breaks for the both of them.

"I just . . . I can't believe she's gone." Nancy says, hoarsely.

"She isn't gone." Mike snaps, averting his eyes. His fingernail runs up the fraying stitches in the cloth on the arm of the La-Z-Boy.

"Oh, Mike, I didn't mean it like that, I just meant . . ." Nancy trails off, helpless.

"I know exactly what you meant, Nance." He says, dully. "You've already given up on her."

"That's not true, Mike." Nancy says, her voice small. Pleading. He shakes his head, and a lock of dark hair falls into his eyes. He doesn't bother to brush it away. Instead, he turns, trying to conceal the tears that threaten to spill over his lashes.

"Why did she do it, Nancy?" He says, thickly. He wipes his nose on his sleeve, blowing out a long, trembling breath. "Why did she go in there? Why would she sacrifice herself . . . after all she's been through . . ." He stops talking, puts his head in his hands. Nancy bites her lip, eyes filling with tears.

"You know why, Mike." She draws a shuddering breath. "She did it for the same reason you jumped off that cliff for Dustin."

Mike whips around, mouth agape. She sniffs, corners of her mouth twitching.

"Yeah, don't think that little detail slipped past me."

Mike bites his lip.

"She did it because she's selfless, just like you. And that's her hamartia. She's willing to lay down her life to protect you . . . to protect Will." Nancy mops her eyes, stares at the floor for a long moment.

"She's an incredible person, a good soul. You are too, Mike. Both of you are good people who've been through a lot of bad things." She says, meeting Mike's eyes. He holds her gaze, lip trembling.

"You deserve better." She pauses, blinking at him. "Mike, I haven't given up on her. And I truly believe that someday, somehow, she's going to find her way back to you."

Mike breaks down, then, slumping against the chair. He weeps, and his whole body shakes. Nancy chokes on her tears, places a hand on his shoulder. A shuffle of sock feet turns her attention to the stairs.

"Mikey?"

Holly stands on the landing, wearing a frilly pink nightgown. She yawns, blinking concernedly at her siblings.

"Hey, Holls." Nancy says, taking a shaky breath. The youngest Wheeler pads down the stairs and scampers across the room. She pauses, gazing worriedly at them.

"You're crying." She says, simply. .

"Yeah, I am." Nancy says, wiping at her tears.

"And Mikey is crying." She says, in a small voice. She clammers into his lap, wrapping her small arms around his neck. Mike returns her embrace, smiling at her through his tears.

"He's sad." Nancy explains, gently. Holly nods, leaning her cheek against Mike's chest.

"He's sad about Ellie."

"That's right."

"She'll come back." Holly says, reassuringly. She takes Mike's hand in both of her small ones.

"She'll come back, Mikey." She says, again. Her brow furrowing as she gazes at her elder brother.

"She'll come back . . ."

. . .

Mike begins to stir in the late morning. Rays of gray light break through the window blinds and fall in slits across the floor. He opens his eyes, gazing groggily around the room. His eyes sting from the tears, and though the clock tells him he has slept for several hours, he is exhausted. His muscles are sore, his thoughts jumbled.

Mrs. Wheeler is in the kitchen. He can hear her soft footsteps, and running water.

Slowly, Mike rises from the La-Z-Boy and traipses up the stairs. He goes to his room and closes the door as quietly as possible. He remains there, alone, for most of the day, letting his hopeless delirium obliterate everything else. At some point, someone knocks, but he ignores them.

He lies on his back, cheek pressed into the carpet, staring at his digital alarm clock. He watches the numbers change, and the minutes bleed into one another. Though he watches time, he has no sense of it. Everything is contained within a thousand infinities, and a single minute. He knows nothing but the ache in his chest and tightness in his throat. He cannot shake the twisted, knotted feeling in his gut. He's withering away.

. . .

Hopper grips the steering wheel with both hands. He whips into the Wheeler's driveway so fast he hits a garbage can and sends it flying across the street. He's too exhausted, too flustered to care. He pounds on the door, then rubs his eyes, unlit cigarette dangling loosely from his lips. Ted Wheeler answers the door, mouth falling slightly agape as he realizes the Chief of Police is standing on his porch. Hopper fidgets impatiently, tapping his foot.

"Hello, I'm Jim Hopper. I think we've met, er . . ." Hopper trails off, attempting to gather his bearings. He is so overwhelmed, so tired . . .

"I need to speak with your son, Mike. Is he here?"

"You . . . need to speak . . . with my son?" Mr. Wheeler says, flabbergasted. He stares at the chief, brows knit.

"He didn't do anything illegal, I hope?"

"What? I . . . no, no he's not in trouble. But I need to speak with him."

"Well, come on in. He's around here somewhere . . . Mike!" Mr. Wheeler calls, in no direction particularly. Hopper steps over the threshold, glancing around the house. Seven-year-old Holly peers at him from the landing. Hopper shoves his hands inside his pockets. There's a soft thud, and the sound of a door opening.

"What?" Mike's voice calls, clearly annoyed, from upstairs.

"Come down here, it's, er . . . Chief Hopper. He wants to talk to you."

More thudding, rapid footsteps. A disheveled and sleep-deprived Mike comes barreling down the stairs, so fast he loses his footing and almost runs into Holly.

"What is it? Did you find her? Did you find El, Will . . . Hopper what is it?" Mike yells, words tumbling from his mouth so fast Hopper can barely understand him. He holds up his hands, waiting for Mike to calm down. The boy's chest heaves, his eyes wild. Hopper tries to hide his immediate concern for the boy.

Mike Wheeler has crossed a line. His eyes are red-rimmed from crying, and glazed from lack of sleep. His hair a tangled mess. His face is drawn, weary and shadowed.

Hopper swallows, meets his gaze.

"I didn't find her. Or Will. They're still missing. Mike, I'm sorry." Mike swallows, nods.

"You're still looking for her, right?"

"Of course. But with everything that's happened . . . It's a lot. Mike, I need to talk to you. In private, if that's alright." Hopper glances at Mr. Wheeler, who nods, looking utterly perplexed by the entire situation. The familiarity in which Hopper and Mike treat each other, the absurdity and chaos in their lives . . . It's all lost on Ted Wheeler.

"Uh, yeah, it's alright. We can . . . go to the basement." Mike says. He

feels weird, showing the Chief around his house. He leads the way down the stairs, turns on the light.

The Chief sinks into the couch with a sigh, rubbing his temples. Mike takes a seat across from him, in a little foldable chair.

"I need you to be completely honest with me here, Wheeler. Alright?"

Mike raises his eyebrows, gives the Chief a little nod.

"Good." The Chief says, clearing his throat. He doesn't need much more. He trusts the kid.

"Yesterday, I found a bunch of tiny organisms in the tap water at a restaurant. In public drinking water. I think they come from the slugs that were inside of Will. They're offspring, or something. That's why all this bullshit has happened." Hopper explains. Mike's brow furrows.

"Offspring? You mean the slugs are having babies in our drinking water?"

"Yes, I think so." Hopper says, nodding. "And there are government officials involved with the case, now . . ."

"Do they know about El?" Mike blurts out, turning white.

"No. Her secret's safe with me, Mike. Don't worry."

Mike exhales, closing his eyes, leaning back in his chair. Hopper licks his lips, stares at the huge Ghostbusters poster on the opposite wall.

"And the incident, at the school. The kid turned into a monster . . ."

"I know." Mike grimaces. "They shot him, Hopper. They murdered him like he was nothing." He pauses, running his fingers up the stitching in his jeans. "They don't give a damn." Mike says, miserably. His voice wavers. Hopper shakes his head.

"I was just there. They wouldn't let me see the body. But they're going to have a hell of a time covering it up. A lot of people saw what happened." Hopper pauses. "I don't trust them. But we can't do anything about it. It's the government."

"You shut down Brenner."

"That was different. We had proof they were running an illegal experiment." Hopper pauses, brow furrowed.

"I'm waiting on a call from the labs, to get the test results. But this is serious. If this is what I think it is, the whole town is in danger."

"And . . . what do you think it is?" Mike says, slowly. He struggles to comprehend what Hopper is implying.

"I think those parasites are causing people to change. People swallow them and get the same sickness that Will has. They turn into monsters."

Mike's breath catches in his throat.

"That's impossible." He breathes.

Hopper shakes his head again, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"We both know it's entirely possible."

Mike nods, because Hopper is right. It's extremely possible. It makes perfect sense. And it's happening right in front of them. The whole town is in danger. That's why that kid changed, at the school. He remembers his previous encounters with other monsters. The one that Lucas killed, in the woods. And the one that Max fought. He shudders, realizing what this means. Those monsters could've been people.

"Hopper . . . there's something you should know."

Mike tells him everything. He tells him about the monster attack, how Lucas got hurt, how they killed it with a knife. He tells him about the government agents that showed up to investigate the dead monster, how they instructed the paramedics to lie to the hospital staff. Mike tells Hopper about his venture back to the lab, the monster that attacked him, how Max saved his life.

Hopper pales, runs a hand over his face. He presses his fingers over his eyelids, silent for a long moment.

"Oh god . . ." He sighs, voice weak.

"What were you thinking?" He yells. Mike gives a start, staring fearfully at the Chief. Hopper's face is unreadable.

"I . . . I was trying to find El, I . . ." Mike stammers, defensive.

"You can't go running off every time she's in danger, Mike." He sighs, leaning back in his chair. He seems to deflate. A few more lines seem to appear in his face, etched around his eyes. "You're just putting yourself in harm's way. You're not helping anyone. You're not a superhero."

"I saved Will, remember?" Mike snaps. The minute it leaves his mouth, he feels stupid saying it.

"Yeah, and look where that got you." Hopper scoffs, bitterly. "A bullet in the leg and a pool of blood nearly as big around as Joyce's kiddie pool."

Mike's fingers find the place above his knee where the gnarled scar mars his skin, where the bullet made it's mark.

"Jesus, Mike. And those friends of yours, Henderson and Sinclair, you put them in danger, too."

Mike swallows, staring at the floor.

"You said Jonathan Byers was with you?"

"Yeah."

Hopper falls silent.

"Those government men, they showed up on the scene when Lucas got attacked?"

"Yeah."

"I never got a call that day. They were trying to cover it up. Mike, why didn't you tell me?" Hopper yells. Mike shakes his head, feeling guilty and stupid all at once.

"I don't know. I don't know, there's been so much going on . . ." He babbles. Hopper growls, rolls his eyes.

A painful silence hangs between them. Mike determinedly keeps his eyes on the floor, avoiding Hopper's gaze. After a long time, he finally speaks up.

"So, what are we gonna do?"

Hopper laughs, but the sound is dull and humorless.

"You are going to stay right here, and get some rest. I'm going to take care of this. I'm gonna find them, and I'm gonna stop this. Alright? You gotta trust me on this. I don't want you running around monster hunting or any of that bullshit. You're more use to me here, safe, away from all this."

Mike starts to argue, but Hopper cuts him off.

"And I think El would very much agree with me. Just think about it, okay? If you get hurt, if you die, it would mess her up pretty good, I guarantee you. And she's had enough bullshit happen to her. She doesn't deserve that."

Mike opens his mouth, closes it again, searching for words. Hopper stands up, pats him on the shoulder awkwardly.

"Take care of yourself."

He climbs the stairs, bids Mr. Wheeler a curt goodbye, and heads out the door. Mike follows him, pauses in the doorway.

"Hey, Chief," He yells. Hopper turns, glances over his shoulder.

"You . . . you take care of yourself, too. You look like hell."

Hopper laughs, for real this time.

"Thanks, kid. I'll give you a call if anything else happens."

Mike nods.

"I'm gonna get her back." He says, giving him a pointed look. Mike swallows the lump in his throat, watching Hopper's car as it whips out of the driveway and races down the road, into the dark, monster-infested streets.

28. The World Is Turning

Hopper reaches the police station, drags his feet up the walk and through the door. Davis, Powell, and Callahan are in the back, talking with a group of high school students and their parents. He makes a beeline for his office, avoiding attention. He shuffles to his desk and sinks into his chair, closes his eyes for a moment. He picks up the phone and begins to listen to the missed calls and messages.

The first few are from frightened parents, inquiring about the incident at the school. After sifting through about five or six, he receives a message from the Microbiology Department at Indiana University. He presses the button with shaking fingers, and the disembodied voice of Dr. Gordon Jones confirms his worst suspicions. Hopper's heart drops through the floor.

He jots down the phone number, and looks up to see Flo standing in the doorway. She gazes at him wearily. He returns the phone to its receiver and meets her eyes, feeling like he's going to be sick. He grips the edge of his desk to keep himself steady.

"We've got a problem."

. . .

Phone calls are made, and letters are sent. And exactly eight hours later, the military units begin to invade Hawkins, Indiana. Soldiers in hazmat suits, equipped with high-caliber weapons, roll into town on military-grade trucks. Government agents in black suits and shiny cars arrive on the scene. Scientists from all over the world, experts in Microbiology and Chemistry, venture to Hawkins to run more tests.

At 6:00 AM on April 7, 1987, a national broadcast appears on the screen of every T.V. in Roane County, warning the public to avoid using water from the tap until notice is given.

Water stations are set up in every neighborhood. Restaurants are temporarily closed. The sewage and water systems are shut down.

The police department is thrown headfirst into a nightmare, facing

public complaints and national news reporters. The town descends into a panic, and Hopper is right at the center.

He stands on the sidewalk, toes just at the edge of the asphalt. He takes a drag on his cigarette, keeping his eyes on the road. In just under a minute, he's watched at least three military vehicles pass by. It's been twenty minutes since the county-wide warning was issued. And the calls and complaints are rolling in. His entire staff is here, already, trying to combat the public's fear, the total chaos of the situation. So much for keeping everything under wraps.

A car pulls into the station's parking lot. Hopper waits and watches, chewing on the end of his cigarette, as three men get out of the car. Two are dressed in suits, and one is an armed soldier in a uniform. He bites back the bitter taste on his tongue and approaches them.

"Hello, sir." The taller of the three says, casually. He offers his hand and Hopper shakes it, thinking it best to uphold the usual formalities. The last thing he wants to do is write his name at the top of their shit list. At least, for now.

"Hello. Jim Hopper." He says, shaking each of their hands in turn. The tall man gives him a polite smile.

"John Raymond." He says. "It's my understanding that you are the head of the police department here, in Hawkins."

He's broad shouldered and broad chested, with graying hair and dark eyes. Hopper nods.

"In the flesh."

"Alright. Well, Jim Hopper, we're here to ask you a few questions. Mind if we go somewhere, er, a bit more private?"

"Not at all. Let's go to my office."

He throws his cigarette on the cement and puts it out, turning up the walk. The men follow him. He leads them through the station. Callahan raises his eyebrows, and Hopper shoots him a look. They file into his office, and he shuts the door behind him.

"So, gentlemen," Hopper says, clearing his throat. "What can I do for you?"

Raymond waits for a moment, then opens his mouth to speak.

They begin to attack him with questions, starting with general inquiries. Soon, though, their question become dangerously specific. They are unrelenting, and meticulous to the last detail.

Hopper has no choice but to talk to them. They were never involved with MK Ultra, and they're certainly not Brenner's people. Still, he doesn't trust them. Not after everything that's happened. Not after everything he's seen . . .

He tells them what he knows. He tells them the stuff they most likely already know: Brenner and MK Ultra and the case that leaked to the public those few years ago. He tells them about the Gate to the Upside Down and the Demogorgon, though they look at him like he's crazy. He doesn't tell them about El, because to do so would put her in danger of imprisonment, lab experiments, or worse . . .

He cares about the girl, he really does. She has become a much a part of his world as Joyce or Will. He doesn't love her like he loved his daughter, but he cares for her. And it scares him, because losing her would be reminiscent of losing Sarah, and he's not sure he can handle something like that. Not again.

He doesn't tell them about Will, either. It's too dangerous. If the kid ever returns, no, when the kid returns, they might capture him for study or experimentation. He can't risk that. So he pretends like he doesn't know the origin of the slugs in the water, only that they're in the town's water and they are, most likely, the cause of these monster attacks and disappearances and incidents. He tiptoes around their demands, all the while trying to ignore the hammering of his heart and the sweat that clings to his neck and the back of his palm. He shouldn't be this nervous. It's not like he's never lied before. In fact, some would say he's a professional.

Hopper reiterates the incident at the school, though he's sure they're directly involved in it already. They don't stop him, so he keeps talking.

He's gambling. He doesn't trust them, and yet he's feeding them massive a amount of information. He's handing them a gun and telling them where to shoot. It's a dangerous game, but he has no choice. The entire town, entire county, is in danger and he's right at the center. He's holding the lives of twenty-thousand people in his hands.

The government officials make a few final notes and make towards the door. They thank him, file out of the station. Hopper watches their car as it pulls out of the parking lot and disappears down the road.

Callahan sighs, loudly. Hopper glances at him. He folds his arms over his chest, shaking his head. He snorts, laughs maniacally.

"Mental."

...

Will lies curled on the tiled floor, trying to get some rest. El sleeps fitfully in the bed above him, turning and fidgeting, mumbling words he doesn't quite catch. Nine and Seven are curled side by side in the opposite corner, burrowed down in a pile of old sheets. Six sits alongside the wall, watching the door. He sits up, rubbing his eyes. She gazes at him, silent.

Their vocabulary seems to be limited, just as El's was when she escaped. He hasn't heard more than five or six words come out of Seven's mouth. Six and Nine, however, seem to be more skilled in that area.

They abducted El when she was only a baby, but Six looks to be in her early thirties. He can't help but wonder, had she lived her entire life in that lab? Or does she have memories of a life outside of it?

Nine looks to be no older than fourteen. Younger than El. And Six said they were weaker. Do they, too, have supernatural abilities? Powers, like El does?

He can't imagine spending four years here. It's impossible for him to comprehend. Each minute contains an eternity. They have no sense

of time. There is no sun, no stars, only a perpetual semi-darkness. The climate does not change, either. It's freezing and damp. Like wearing wet clothes in the snow.

El cries out, and Nine sits up quickly. She blinks, eyes locking on Will across the room. Six fidgets, shifting her weight.

"She needs medicine." He says.

"There is none." Six says, quietly. Will sighs, brushing hair out of his eyes.

"We can walk to the hospital, in town. It's a few miles away. We can get there in an hour or two."

"Dangerous. Monsters." Nine says.

"She's going to die if we don't. And we need her. She can open a gate, she can get us out of here." Will pauses. "I need to keep her alive. She's my friend."

Six and Nine remain quiet. He swallows the lump in his throat.

"Please."

. . .

Six walks alongside him, eyes darting around. They set off at a brisk pace, trying to get there and back as fast as possible. They're quiet for a long time, and the only sound is the soft crunching of plant matter under their feet. They make it through the fence and up alongside the road, following Mirkwood.

"How did you get here?" Six inquires.

"I . . . I opened the rift. I went through it." Will says. "El followed me."

"How? Why? Here is a bad place. Why come here?"

"I . . . I'm sick." Will says.

"Sick?"

"Yeah. I was trapped here a few years ago. I got sick, and it makes me go crazy. Sometimes . . . sometimes, it's like . . . I turn into a monster. I'm not myself."

Six gasps.

"You are a Vessel." She says, looking aghast.

"A Vessel?"

"Yes. My friend, Experiment Five, she was a Vessel. She died." Six says.

"What's a Vessel?"

Six gives him a hard look. "Like a host. A dog is a host to worms, a Vessel is a host to the Queen's offspring."

"The Queen?"

"Yes. The Queen is an ancient being. She controls the creatures here."

Will's head spins.

"The offspring . . . the offspring are the slugs? Slimy creatures?"

Six nods.

"Yes, they start small and grow bigger. If you are a Vessel you transform into a monster. The darkness takes over. Will, you're a Vessel. You are in danger."

Will's heart sinks. He pinches the bridge of his nose, trying to stop the sky from spinning. He's quiet for a long moment. They cross the street and turn onto Kerley, the road that will take them into town.

"How do you stop being a Vessel?"

"I don't know." Six says, uneasily. "Five got sicker and sicker. Once, she changed and she didn't change back, she tried to hurt us. I, I . . ." She trails off, face twisting into a sorrowful grimace.

"I killed her."

Will's breath catches in his throat. He searches for the right words . . . what do you say to something like that?

"I'm sorry you had to go through that." He gets out, finally.

"It was the only way." Six says. Her voice is ragged. She falls silent, looking distant, lost in a memory . . .

. . .

Six remembers the moss under her fingertips, the stench. And the darkness. The darkness was suffocating. She recognized her surroundings. She knew she was still in the lab, but it was different, somehow. Darker, quieter, colder. She was alone.

She got off the floor, where she'd woken to the sound of a child's scream. She gathered her bearings, enough to get herself moving and looking for something, anything, that made sense.

And she found Seven.

A child, only eight years old. Taken as a newborn and raised in the lab. Seven didn't quite meet Brenner's expectations, so he was shoved away in a closet like the rest of them.

Six doesn't know many things. Sometimes, she struggles to fit the pieces of her memories together. It's all fragmented. She suspects Brenner had a hand in it. They did something to her memories, her mind.

She had a life outside of the lab. And though she doesn't remember much of it, some things come back to her in dreams. She was loved. She had a family, friends. And it's impossible to make a person forget something like that. Something like love.

Six and Seven kept each other company, kept each other warm, until Nine, disheveled and terrified, appeared in the doorway of the cell where they were hidden.

A mere hours later, they found Five.

They'd been in the closet for too long. They awoke to a scream, and

the stench of dying plants.

So they stayed hidden. They kept each other alive. They stole food and clothes from the houses in town. And they remained near the lab, because it was the only thing they'd ever known.

Then the monsters came, and they learned of the Queen, the nickname coined to the beast that lives along the outskirts of Hawkins. The creature that controls all the others.

The monsters came.

And Five went missing.

When she appeared again, months later, she was not the same.

She'd become a Vessel, a host. A carrier. The Pestilence was inside her, and it would destroy her. It started with the sickness and the slugs.

And the flashes. She became inhuman, and stuck between two worlds.

And when she changed, and didn't change back, Six killed her.

The light left her eyes quickly. It was a bloodless, painless death

Six replays it in her head too often, desperately searching for something she could've done, something that would've kept her alive. The thoughts run circles inside her head like a dog chasing its tail.

There's never any resolution. It doesn't matter anyway.

She's dead.

. . .

"Where is the Queen?"

"I don't know. She lives far from here. The creatures in this place, they're controlled by her. They're offspring, too."

Will and Six arrive at the hospital. The building, like everything else

in this place, is encased in vines, dark and deserted. He pushes on the double doors. They groan, swing open. They make their way past the lobby. He finds the sign that reads "Pharmacy" and it leads them through another set of double doors and down a hallway.

Every sound, every creak and groan, makes him jump. Their footsteps echo through the halls. Here, in the Upside Down, the hospital isn't much different from the lab. It's white tiled walls and halls are eerily familiar.

The door to the pharmacy is at the end of the hall. He reaches it, and pulls open the door. He hears a shuffle, a frightening shriek. Something collides with the side of his head and he blacks out.

. . .

Will props himself onto one elbow, hand reaching for the bleeding wound on the side of his head. He blinks, groggily. Six is yelling, combating a monster. Immediate fear rises in his throat as he looks on, watching her dodge an attack. It's sluggish, yet oddly reptilian. It's small, it's shoulders barely reaching Six's waist.

The monster's cries echo inside his head. The room tilts dizzily, and he struggles to regain his balance. His stomach twists painfully, and he slumps forward, hand jumping towards his mouth. He coughs, reaching for breath. The horrible, yet familiar, feeling of the slugs climbing up his throat fills him with dread. His body convulses, his eyes sting with tears. Two small slugs tumble out of his mouth, onto the tiled floor. He squeezes his eyes shut, wiping his mouth.

And just as quickly as the feeling came, it leaves, leaving him weak and dizzy but no longer in danger of puking up anymore slugs. He sighs inwardly, relief washing over him. He didn't transform. Not this time.

He looks over to see the monster throw Six against the wall, claws ripping at her clothing. Will springs to his feet, crushing the slugs beneath his foot. He turns, rushing to her aid.

"Stand back!" She yells, lifting her arms. The monster launches backwards, thrust against a glass window. It shatters, and the

creature screams. It twitches, then falls still. Six blinks, slumps against the wall. Blood stains her upper lip, and for a moment, she looks so much like El . . .

The monster is dead, its soft underbelly impaled by a shard of glass. Six stares at her hands, looking mildly surprised.

Will blinks at her, hardly daring to breathe. His heart is hammering, his thoughts all jumbled together. He makes his feet move, eyes darting from Six to the monster's body and back again. She stares at the crushed slug bodies, not more than a few feet away from where he stands.

"Are you alright?" She says, pointing towards the slugs' squashed bodies. Will nods.

"Hurry, get the medicine." She says, stepping forward. "We need to leave."

. . .

Will edges around the broken glass, makes his way over the door by the counter. In the back room, there are shelves lined with various medicines. Six appears by his side, still pale and breathing heavily after her battle with the . . . the whatever that thing was. Together, they rummage through the bins, drawers, and boxes, searching for anything that may be of help. He knows it's dangerous to give El anything without a prescription, without knowing the proper dose, but they have no choice. She's dying. This is their only option.

He finds a small glass bottle with some colorless liquid. Wiping away the slime and debris, he reads the label. It's an injectible antibiotic. Six hands him a cardboard box containing several packaged needles. He stuffs the glass bottle and the needles into his pocket, then sifts through a few more medications. He finds some a bottle of pills labeled "fever reducers, etc." He pockets them as well, giving Six a thumbs-up. She gives him a curt nod and clambers back over the counter. They make their way back to the lobby and through the double doors. A heavy silence surrounds them. Will focuses on the squelching sound of their footsteps and the soft clinking of the medicine in his pocket; He tries not to think of home, or El's dire

predicament, and can think of nothing else.

. . .

Back in the lab, Will sits at the edge of the bed. He holds the bottle with shaking fingers, looking at the dosage instructions. It's listed by weight. He glances at El. She's barely five foot two. On a good day, she couldn't weigh more than a hundred pounds. Now, after a week of little water and no food, she's probably eighty. Tops. Her face, once healthy and full, is gaunt and skeletal. Her eyes appear to be sunken too far into her head. Her cheek and collar bones are too prominent, her skin waxy and pale. He sticks the needle in the top of the bottle, pulling the plunger to the correct mark on the syringe.

He grips her wrist, taking a deep breath. He sticks the needle in the soft skin of her upper arm, presses the plunger. She does not stir, remains unconscious. Six tips her head back and forces a couple of the fever pills down her throat. Nine approaches the bed, places her hand on El's forehead. She frowns, brow furrowing. Will takes a breath, and tears spring in his eyes. Hastily, he wipes them away.

Seven clings to Nine's waist, blinking concernedly at Will. He gives the kid a small smile. Nine takes her hand away, reaches down to pat Seven's arm, gently. Six meets Will's eyes.

"She's in control, now. We can only wait."

Will nods. Nine retreats to the corner, where she continues to stare, silent and brooding, between them. Seven goes to the corner and picks up a small stuffed lion, runs his hands along it's matted fur. He trots toward Will, holding it out to him.

"Thank you." Will says, weakly, taking the animal from the boy. He used to have one just like it, back home. Seven grins, then goes to Six. She wraps her arms around him. A thought jumps into his head.

"You have powers, like El." He blurts out. Six nods.

"Yes. From the experiments. From the bath."

"Can you open a gate? Can you get us out of here?"

Six's face contorts. She shakes her head.

"No." She pauses, chewing on her lip. "Not strong enough. My powers are weak, it tires me greatly." She gestures to El. "She is much stronger, much more powerful than any of us."

"Nine? Seven? You have abilities, too?"

Nine nods, looking grave.

"Yes. I cannot do what Six can, but I can feel . . . emotions. I can feel what you feel."

"You're an empath." Will says. Nine blinks at him, confused. "Empaths can feel emotions." He explains.

She nods.

"Yes . . . I am . . . an empath." She says, slowly, tasting the word. "Seven is an empath, too."

"Cool." Will says. Even though he's known El for almost four years now, it's still hard to comprehend. The whole superhero thing is still difficult to wrap his head around.

Two empaths. And Six has telekinesis. He's pretty sure El can do all that stuff. She can detect a lie in an instant, and she seems to pick up on other people's emotions a lot better than everyone else.

. . .

Will recalls the time Mike fell out of a tree and broke his arm. At the time, El wasn't anywhere near him. In fact, she was with Will at the school, helping Mr. Clark with a new experiment for his sixth grade class. They were stapling papers together and organizing a bunch of test tubes and thermometers. El dropped the beaker she was holding, crying out in pain. Will looked up, thinking she cut herself on glass or something.

He couldn't see any blood. She was pale, though, her eyes wide with fear.

"Mike." She said.

"What?"

"Mike's hurt."

"What? How d'you . . ."

She was already up and running, out the door, through the school hallways to the payphone in the parking lot. Later, they would go to visit Mike in the emergency room. He broke his arm in two places, at the wrist and along the Radius bone. He was exactly four miles away from El at the time.

. . .

He can't be sure, but he strongly suspects Mike is able to communicate with her in ways that others can't. She can probably communicate telepathically with anyone she wants to. And Mike just happens to be her preferred conversationalist.

No surprises there.

"Cool." Nine echoes, looking amused and perplexed. Will nods. Silence stretches between them, but it's not uncomfortable.

Will settles himself at the foot of El's bed, still holding the stuffed lion. He traces it's once-soft ears with his fingertips, chewing over the events of the last few hours.

He puked slugs, and yet he did not change. He didn't become a monster this time around. Why?

Six's words replay in his head. She told him he was a Vessel. Whatever that means . . .

He supposes it makes sense. He carries the slugs. He's a host. And the slugs are the Queen's offspring. He shudders, inwardly. The Queen. He can only imagine . . .

And Number Five. Six told him that she changed into a monster, and she didn't change back.

Now, she's dead.

He pushes the foul thoughts from his mind, suddenly lightheaded and exhausted. He yearns for a pencil, a piece of paper. Anything to get the demons out of his head.

He takes a deep breath and leans back against the mattress. He glances at El, who remains motionless and asleep, all skin and bones and deathly pallor. Will sighs and closes his eyes, slipping into a fitful slumber.

29. The Bath

Mike slips out of the house in the late morning. The sun is already high in the sky. A warm breeze brushes across his forehead, ruffling through his dark mop of curls. He shuffles down the walk, shoulders stooped, absentmindedly kicking a pebble across the concrete.

Just a few hours ago, a county-wide warning aired on their T.V. His family crowded around it, his mother dressed in a fluffy bathrobe, with her rollers still in and her face unpainted. His dad, rubbing sleep from his eyes and grumbling about the Commies. Nancy, dressed in Jonathan's t-shirt, eyes puffy and red. Holly, confused and sleepy, glancing from his mom to the words flashing on the screen and back again.

He gave them the main points of his conversation with Hopper, told them to avoid the water from the tap. They're uneasy and confused, but then again, so is the entire town.

The whole county's water system is down. He can see a military truck parked on the corner of the cul-de-sac. Uniformed men are stacking crates of water jugs under a little tent. A few doors down, Mrs. Blackburn and Mrs. Sinclair are talking in low voices, looking anxious.

"Hey, Mrs. Sinclair, Mrs. Blackburn," Mike says, greeting them.

"Michael!" Mrs. Sinclair exclaims, pulling him into a hug. "Are you getting along alright?" She asks, concernedly. Her brows furrow as she glances at the Wheeler boy, noting the pallor in his face and the shadows under his eyes.

Mike nods, patting her arm.

"Yeah, I'm alright." .

She shakes her head, gesturing to the soldiers down the street. "This is insanity! Utter madness. We can't drink our own water anymore? And they're talking about microorganisms . . ." She trails off, shaking her head and mumbling under her breath.

Mike shrugs

"Mrs. Sinclair, is it alright if I go in and see Lucas? I need to talk to him."

"Of course."

Mike takes the porch steps two at a time and opens the front door.

"Lucas?" He calls.

"Mike? Up here."

Mike makes his way up the stairs and pushes on Lucas' bedroom door.

"Wheeler!" Lucas yells happily. He sits up, but quickly stops moving, a pained grimace crossing his face.

"Lucas, my man, how's it going?" Mike says, grinning. Lucas runs his hand along the stitches in his arm, frowning.

"Never been better" He says, tiredly, rolling his eyes.

"Did you hear about what happened at the school?"

"Yeah. My mom got the call. I tried calling you, but your sister picked up. She said you were asleep. I didn't want to bother you."

Mike shrugs.

"And now all this stuff's going on with the water system . . ."

"Yeah, I know." Mike takes a breath, looking at his friend.

"Hopper came to my place last night. He wanted to talk to me."

"The Chief?" Lucas says, surprised. "What'd he say?"

"He's the one that found the parasites in the water. He thinks the slugs-the things that come out of Will-he thinks they're like larvae or something. That's why we've seen so many monsters. And the larvae is in the town's water system. That's why that kid turned into a

monster, he got sick. The slugs make people turn into monsters." Mike explains. Lucas gasps.

"That means . . . that means the whole town could be infected! Our families, anyone who drinks from the tap!" He pauses, a glossy look coming over his eyes.

"That means the monster I killed . . . was a person. Mike, I-I killed someone." He says, numbly. His eyes fill with tears, and a face twists into an expression of pure despair and agony. Mike's heart sinks.

"Lucas, it's not your fault, you didn't have a choice . . ."

"It was." He says, hollowly. Tears roll down his cheeks, and he wipes them away.

"I . . . killed . . . someone." He breathes, voice catching.

"Lucas . . ." Mike begins, sighing. "It wasn't your fault. You didn't know what it was. You were protecting us. It would've killed us. It would've killed me, Lucas. Please, you have to know that. It's not your fault." Mike is crying now, pleading with him. Lucas shakes his head, burying his face in his hands.

"It wasn't your fault."

. . .

Eventually, Lucas calms down enough to insist they call Dustin and fill him in. Mike happily obliges, jumping on the chance to change the subject. Just a few minutes later, Mike hears the sound of car tires scraping against asphalt. He glances at the window, watching Dustin's car as it pulls into the driveway. They hear the door slam, and he appears in the doorway, accompanied by Max.

"What's going on, awesome nerds?" He yells. His smile disappears as he catches sight of the looks on their faces.

"Oh shit, who died?" He says, looking apprehensive.

"Nobody."

"What's wrong?" Max asks, quietly.

"I just want to talk," Mike says, "about . . . everything." He takes a breath. "You guys saw the public warning they sent out, right?"

Dustin and Max nod, simultaneously.

"Hopper came to my house last night." Mike says, grimacing.

"And . . .?"

"We're in deep shit right about now."

. . .

Max paces the room, running her hands through her mane of red hair. She takes a seat on Lucas' desk chair, but jumps up again, muttering under her breath. The sight is oddly comical, and very reminiscent of Dustin. Mike resists the weird urge to laugh.

"So, let me get this straight . . ." Max says, glaring at the three of them.

"There are parasites in the town's water. The parasites came from Will, who was, er . . . incubating them. People are drinking them and turning into monsters."

Mike glances around at the three of them, shrugging.

"Yeah, that pretty much sums it up." He says, exasperated. Dustin tugs on his hat, looking distraught.

"What do we do?" He yells, despairingly.

"Nothing. We can't do anything but hope that none of us, or our families, turn into monsters." Lucas says, thickly.

"But . . ."

"But what, Dustin? We can't do a goddamn thing about this. It sucks, but it's the truth." He yells. Dustin recoils, looking stung. Max glances at Mike, cocking an eyebrow.

"And what about Eleanor?"

"What?"

"El and Will are still stuck in the Upside Down, right?" Mike nods, eyes full of anguish and sorrow.

"Well, what are we gonna do about it? Maybe we can't save the whole town, but we can save them." Max says, firmly. For some reason, her words rub Mike the wrong way. Suddenly he's angry. He jumps up from the floor, brow furrowing. He glares at Max.

"Don't you think if there was even the slightest chance that I could do something for her, I would've? Don't you understand? I've tried to contact her. I've tried to find a way, and all it does is get more people hurt. When we went looking for a gate, we found a monster, and Lucas' shoulder got fucked up. When I tried to contact her, I put you in danger, Max!" He's yelling, and blood rushes to his cheeks. Max takes a step back, looking stung.

"It kills me every single day, thinking of her stuck in that place. But we can't do anything about it. I can't fix this. I can't do a single thing. A. Single. Goddamn. Thing." His voice breaks, and he takes a breath, trying to collect himself. All the rage and fight has gone out of him. He leans against the wall, pressing the heels of his palms over his eyelids.

Max swallows, face softening. She reaches for him.

"Mike . . ."

"No." He whimpers, shrugging away from her touch.

"Mike, come on man . . ." Dustin says, looking worried.

"I understand." Max says, quietly.

"No. You don't."

"I do. My mom . . . my mom died when I was eleven. Mike, I know what it's like to lose someone you love. It hurts like hell." She says. "But my mom is dead, and Eleanor is not. Which means you've got a

chance." Her voice wavers, breaks on the last word.

"Do you have any idea what I'd give . . . for a chance?"

. . .

"We need a plan." Max says, folding her hands over her chest.

"We could go back out to the woods, maybe a gate has opened up somewhere." Lucas suggests.

"No. It's too dangerous. Besides, it won't work anyway. There's no gate." Mike says, shaking his head.

"Well, how did she get back last time?"

"She opened a gate."

"So . . . why hasn't she opened one yet?"

"I don't know. Maybe she can't, maybe she's not strong enough." Mike says, chewing on his lip. "Something's holding them up."

Dustin groans.

"If only we had superpowers. We could find a way to contact her with some telepathy shit or something."

An idea falls into Mike's head.

"Maybe we can."

All three of his friends turn around, looking at him.

He steels himself, and tells them everything. About their telepathic connection. The bridge that they built over the years. He explains, with great difficulty, the entanglement of their thoughts and emotions.

It's difficult to put into words. He's so used to it, it's hard to remember a time when it wasn't like that. El's mind is as familiar to him as his own. It's a part of him, just as his thoughts are a part of him, just like his hand is a part of him. And even though she's gone,

her presence lingers in the depths of his consciousness. It's faint and quiet, but it's there, and it's the only thing keeping him going.

His friends' expressions turn from confusion to shock to awe as he struggles to describe it. It makes him feel weird, almost guilty, sharing this stuff with them. Like he's told them some dark secret, or bared his soul. Which he kind of has, in a way.

A deep blush crawls up his neck and onto his freckle-smattered cheeks.

"Woah, dude. She made you into a freaking telepath!" Dustin says, excitedly.

"Not really." Mike says, rolling his eyes. "She's in control, and she's way better at it than I am. If she wanted to break the barrier, she could do it, easily. She could block me out. But I can't, nor would I want to." He says, firmly. "I just kind of piggy-back on whatever she does with the connection. I can contact her, but it doesn't work as well." He explains.

Dustin rolls his eyes.

"You're so modest, Wheeler. You're a badass telepathic superhero and you know it!"

Mike laughs. Max clears her throat, glancing at Mike.

"Wait . . . so you're saying you can contact her *telepathically* and you haven't tried to?"

"Of course I've tried to." He snaps. "I can't get it to work. Like I said, I'm not good at it."

"Is there anything we can do to make the connection stronger?"

"We can take him to the Heathkit." Dustin suggests.

"Mr. Clarke's Heathkit? That one broke, years ago." Lucas says.

"I thought he got a new one."

"Yeah, he did. That one broke, too. Remember . . . the Grape Juice Incident?"

"Oh, yeah." Dustin says, chuckling.

"And the Super Com doesn't work?"

Mike shakes his head, eyes flicking to the floor.

"No. I've tried. It doesn't work."

"What about a bath?" Lucas says.

"What, did I forget to put on deodorant this morning?" Dustin says, sniffing his shirt.

Lucas rolls his eyes.

"No, dumbass. I'm talking about the Sensory Deprivation Tank. El could contact Will in the kiddie pool thing we made, remember? What if we throw Mike in there and see if he can reach her? She can tell us if she needs help, or where she is . . ."

Mike swallows, thinking hard. It's doubtful. He's not good with the mental communication. Never has been. El's the one who gives him the extra push, who's always the one reaching out for him. But what choice do they have?

He stares at Lucas, and gives a small nod.

"That could work."

. . .

"C'mon man, you're being ridiculous." Mike groans. He pushes turns the corner, pushing a shopping cart down the "Baking" aisle. The cart is laden with a box of Eggos, a bag of Reese's Pieces, and . . . Dustin. The sixteen-year-old fidgets, trying to arrange his legs in a way that is comfortable as he sits in the cart, grinning from ear to ear.

"Aw Wheeler, you're no fun!" Dustin says, cheerfully. He picks up the Reese's Pieces and starts shoveling some into his mouth.

"And you're not two." Max says, rolling her eyes. Dustin sticks his tongue out, glaring at her.

Mike's eyes rove over the various baking products on the shelves. Weirdly, a lot of the store's products have been picked clean. Bradley's Big Buy is crawling with apprehensive, anxious people. The checkout lines curve around the isles. Customers push shopping carts filled with water bottles and jugs, canned goods, and various other products. It's like they're stocking up on emergency supplies, or getting ready to evacuate.

People are scared.

"Found the salt." Mike says, looking up at the shelves. He finds the largest box, one containing rock salt for ice cream, and begins stacking them in the cart. Max helps him, taking several armfuls of the boxes.

"You think this is going to be enough?"

"It's gonna have to be." Mike says, shortly. When they have relieved Bradley's Big Buy of its stock of salt products, they make their way to the checkout line.

They can't go to the school. It's crawling with police and government men, still investigating the case. Plus, the school probably doesn't even have de-icing salt at the moment. It's April.

As they wait in line, Max picks up a newspaper from the rack and begins thumbing through it, frowning.

"There's been another incident, late last night. Some guy was attacked by a monster. He's alive, and in stable condition." Max says, handing Mike the paper. Mike reads the article, then stares at the photo that accompanies it. It's blurry. Sure enough, in the corner, you can just make out a glimpse of some other worldly creature. This one has a slightly humanoid form, like the Demogorgon, but with a longer face and no flower petal appendages. Mike shivers, finger sliding over the photo, tracing the creature's silhouette.

His eyes move down the page, finding on a photo of a pretty, young

woman with dark hair and dark eyes The article below the photo introduces her as Jamie Reeves, the woman that Hopper's been looking for. They haven't found her yet.

Another article illustrates the school incident in obscure details. A government official informs the public that the case will be solved soon, and assures the public that Hawkins remains safe. Mike shakes his head, scoffing.

"What?" Max says, cocking an eyebrow.

He reads the article aloud, and she laughs, bitterly.

"Safe? Yeah, right." She rolls her eyes. Mike flips a couple more pages and finds the page with the obituaries. He skims through the short little articles. There's an entire page dedicated to the victims of the school attack. Aaron McCaffrey, Julia Martin, and Tim Holloway. His eyes fill with tears as he gazes at their pictures. He closes the paper and sets it back on the rack, taking a deep breath. Max looks at him concernedly, says nothing. Dustin continues to munch on his Reese's Pieces, oblivious.

When it's their turn to check out, the store clerk raises her eyebrows and purses her lips as they begin stacking the boxes of salt on the counter. She eyes them suspiciously, pointing an accusing finger at them.

"Now, what d'you think you're doing with all this salt?"

Max shrugs, glances at Mike. Dustin speaks up, mouth still full of candy.

"Er . . . We're doing a science project." He says, unconvincingly. Max snorts, covers her mouth with her hand to suppress a laugh. The clerk continues to shoot them disapproving looks as she rings them up. They leave the store with a cart full of salt, their pockets considerably lighter. They load it into the trunk of Dustin's car. He pulls out of the parking lot and speeds down the road.

"Now what? Where do we go?"

"The Byers. We need the kiddie pool."

. . .

"If Joyce finds out what we're doing, she'll tell Hopper, and then we're totally screwed. So we need to be stealthy." Dustin says. "Like ninjas."

Mike rolls his eyes.

"Shut up, Dustin. I'm just gonna go in there and get it. I'll only be a few minutes."

"No way, Mike. Nobody goes into a dangerous mission alone. I got your back, bro." Dustin assures him, beating his chest. "Max, you be our getaway driver." He says. Max rolls her eyes, muttering something that sounds suspiciously like "dumbasses" under her breath. Nevertheless, she climbs into the front seat and shoots them a quick thumbs-up.

"Alright, Mikey. Get ready to live." Dustin says, loudly. He pulls his hood up, looking around.

"Dustin . . . we're literally stealing a kiddie pool. Calm down."

The Byers property is quiet and lonely. The old house seems to be stooping more than ever. The plants around the front yard are withering. The clothes on the line ruffle occasionally in the breeze, swaying like a row of ghosts.

Mike walks around the back, Dustin following closely behind. He pushes on the door, which groans on rusty hinges. Mike flicks the light switch and begins rummaging around while Dustin keeps watch outside. It doesn't take him long to find the folded pool wedged between a box of old board games and another, smaller cardboard box marked "Photos".

He drops the pool and opens the box, curiosity getting the better of him. He thumbs through the enormous stack of photographs. They're covered in a layer of dust. Most of the recent ones were taken by Jonathan. Mike recognizes a lot of them. And he realizes, with a pang, that a lot of them contain Will, and sometimes El. A thousand memories flash in his mind's eye as he looks through them.

There's a photo of the five of them, crowded around a trophy for the science fair of '85. That year, El also participated, and they got first place.

There are photos of them in the summer, holding ice cream cones or sitting by a campfire. Mike finds a photo of Will teaching El drawing techniques. Another one features Steve, Nancy's old boyfriend and their friend, giving El a piggy back ride. It's dated August 7th, 1984. Her cheeks are red from laughing, her short hair tousled and sticking up all over the place. Tentatively, he traces the picture with his thumb. His fingernail runs down the curve of her cheeks, the slope of her nose, her lashes, her lips.

"Mike did you find it yet? You're taking forever." Dustin complains, voice floating through the thin, wooden walls of the shed.

"Hold on, Dustin." Mike snaps, impatiently. The shed is stuffy and hot. Mike sniffs, wiping the beads of sweat off his brow. He continues sorting through them.

The photos at the bottom of the box are older. He finds various baby pictures of Will and Jonathan. He comes across a photo of Joyce and Lonnie, at their wedding. Joyce is young and beautiful.

The picture is a slap in the face. In the photo, her face is no longer gaunt and lined, her eyes no longer showing signs of exhaustion but bright and lively. She's laughing, holding Lonnie's hand. Lonnie looks happy, too, which is funny because all Mike remembers about Lonnie is that he wasn't around much. And when he was, he drank a lot and yelled even more.

Mike looks closer at the photo. Under the folds of Joyce's wedding dress, he can see the gentle curve of her pregnant belly. She's probably about four or five months along in this picture. Will told him, once, that the only reason they got married was because of the baby. Mike swallows hard, glaring at the photo. He sets it down, feeling guilty, like he's unearthed some dark family secret. He can't stop himself, though, and continues to sort through a scrapbook and another stack of pictures, ignoring Dustin's muffled complaints.

He comes across a photo that pulls him up short. It's from the Snow

Ball. Mike gazes down at the picture of himself and El. She's standing on her tiptoes, smiling lips pressed against his cheek. It's a candid photo. He remembers the moment clearly. He doesn't know if he was even breathing, that night.

His eyes fill with tears, and he tries to blink them away. He can't pull his eyes away, staring at the photo, blurred through his tears.

"Mike! Did you get it?" Dustin yells. Mike is jerked from his reverie.

"What? Yeah, I got it." He calls, but his voice trembles. Gently, he folds the photo and tucks it into his pocket. He closes the box and stoops to pick up the kiddie pool when he begins to hear the Byers' dog barking wildly.

"Shit." Dustin says, poking his head through the crack in the door, which hangs ajar.

"Uh, Mike, we gotta go. Snuffaluffagus is after us." He says, voice rising an octave. Mike shoves the kiddie pool under his arm and turns the light off, following Dustin out the door. They sprint across the dying grass, towards the car. Mike throws the pool in the back seat and dives in after it, struggling to fit his long legs inside the car. Dustin drops into the passenger seat and pulls the door shut.

"Drive, before that dog wakes the dead. Jesus, he's loud." Mike says. Max slams on the gas. Dustin's little car hauls ass down the drive, lurching around the corner.

"That went well." Max says, rolling her eyes.

"Of course it did." Dustin says, puffing out his chest. He pats her shoulder, grinning toothily.

"We're ninjas."

...

Mike peels off his clothes until he's standing in only his boxer shorts, staring at the water in the kiddie pool. Dustin dumps salt into the water. Max is holding the hose, staring blankly at the rippling surface, lost in thought.

"I think we're good." Dustin says. "This might work, Mike."

They're in Mike's backyard. His parents are both at work, and Holly is at the park with Nancy. They have at least an hour without any disturbance.

Max turns the water off, and Dustin hands him the bandana they found buried in his closet. Mike puts it on, and Max grips his upper arm, helping him climb into the water. He stoops until he's sitting in it.

"Here goes nothing." He says, grimacing. He stretches out, so he's lying on his back. He's tall, and his toes and fingers brush the plastic edges of the pool.

Dustin switches on the Super Com. The sound of fuzzy static fills the air. Mike swallows, letting the gentle lapping of the water and the faint, white noise of the device drown out everything else. He focuses on timing his breaths, letting his heartbeat slow. Once the world has blurred and faded away, he tries reaching out to her.

It's slow going. He inches along the entwined mental threads, calling her name. He has to sort through different memories, through fragments of thought. It's an exhausting, meticulous task, like untangling thousands of tiny knots.

Soon, he loses all sense of time. He can feel her presence now, stronger than before. She's with him. She could be standing right beside him.

El?

He says, reaching out, stretching his consciousness over the bridge. He can imagine her mind, her neurons. She's beautiful. She is a pulsing light, a heartbeat. Her mind is a thousand shades of gold and silver and everything in between.

El?

He focuses his entire consciousness on her, trying to reach out, to make contact. It's difficult, and he can feel himself tiring quickly, but he doesn't care. He refuses to let her go.

El? El, are you there? El!

A fraction of a second. A blink of an eye. And his heart leaps into his throat.

Mike!

30. Quarantine

El struggles to open her eyes. At first, she can't figure out where she is. It's cold, so cold . . . and dark. She's reminded of the time the Wheelers took her camping, the cool dampness of the tent. She feels around for a certain, freckle-faced boy who'd fallen asleep in the sleeping bag beside her. Her fingers stretch out in the darkness, and she mumbles his name, trying to scoot closer to him. She seeks his warmth and safety; he is so much different from the cold hallways and dank rooms of the lab she grew up in, so much better.

Vaguely, she wonders why her arm feels so heavy. After a few moments of fruitless searching, she realizes Mike isn't there. Simultaneously, she becomes aware of the fact that someone is calling her name. The voice is distant, barely audible.

She tries to sit up, but her body aches, and her head spins. She looks to her left, expecting to find a tousle-haired, sleepy Mike beside her. Instead, she finds a layer of slimy, black vines and an equally slimy stuffed lion.

The memories come rushing back, like a sucker-punch to the stomach. The Upside Down. The puncture wounds. The fever. Number Six.

El!

Mike's voice screams inside her head.

Her eyelids fly open, and she struggles to make sense of anything in the darkness. He's still screaming, pleading, calling out to her.

"Mike!" She reacts instinctively, screaming his name, mentally and physically. Abruptly, his presence vanishes.

"No." She moans, cursing herself for letting him slip from her grasp. She has to protect him, she has to save him . . .

Some unintelligible noise escapes her throat, and she pushes herself upright, breath caught in her throat. Her thoughts scatter in all

directions. She can't make sense of anything, and all she can think is that Mike's hurt or in danger . . .

She feels as if her lungs are being squeezed, struggles to get oxygen into her system. She whimpers, and tears begin to fall down her cheeks, thick and fast. The panic rises in her chest, obliterating everything else. Will, awoken by the sudden movement, jumps to his feet. He's at her bedside in an instant, holding her hand, urging her to breathe.

"Mike. Will, Mike, h-he's c-calling for m-me . . ." She hiccups, frantic.

"El, just breathe. It was probably just a bad dream." He says, trying to reassure her. She shakes her head. It wasn't. It was real.

"No, Will. It wasn't a d-dream, he n-needs me . . ." She says, and she dissolves into tears again. Her breaths come quick and shallow. Sobs wrack her body.

"El! El, look at me. You can't do anything for him. No, El, look at me." He says, gripping her wrists, forcing her to meet his eyes. Her chest heaves, and she's fighting for air. Will is shaking, and tears roll down his own cheeks.

"You can't do anything for him. Alright? But you can help yourself. I need you to breathe. Okay?" He says, voice breaking. "With me. In. Out. Like this. In. Out."

In.

One. Two. Three.

Out.

"Good. El, you can do this. Breathe. With me, okay? In." He inhales, holding her gaze.

"Out." He exhales.

In.

One. Two. Three

Out.

One. Two. Three.

She focuses on her breathing for several minutes, staring at him, watching his eyes. Now, the confusion and delirium has faded somewhat. She reaches into the far corners of her consciousness, brushing against Mike's mind. The action is subtle, but she can feel him. He's alive. He's okay. He's safe.

Maybe it was just a bad dream. She doesn't trust herself anymore, with the fever, the delirium.

El forces herself to push him out of her thoughts. The farther away Mike is, the better. She needs to keep him safe.

In. Out.

In. Out.

She focuses on Will. He's alive. They're alive. But they're stuck in this hell hole. The thought is enough to send her mind reeling, causes the panic to return.

He takes a few more breaths, and she times her inhalations and exhalations with his until the black spots have faded from her vision and she calms down enough to get a good look at her surroundings.

They're in the lab, in a small room very much like the one she used to call home. She shivers, wanting nothing more than to run straight through the door and never look back, but she forces herself to be still. The panic is ebbing, leaving exhaustion and dizziness in its wake.

Six approaches her bedside, looking weary and apprehensive. El's eyes soften when she sees her fellow MK Ultra victim.

"Eleven?" Six whispers, tentatively. El nods, tears in her eyes.

"Call me El." She says, gently. And for the first time, she's seeing her, *really* seeing her. Their previous meetings were clouded with fever and pain and fear.

"El." Six says, nodding. El holds out her good arm, reaching for the woman. Tentatively, Six takes hold of El's hand and holds fast.

They stay like that for a long while, not saying anything, reading the pain and the bad memories written in one another. They share a common past. For El, this is the first time in a long time that she's been in such close contact with the horrors of the lab. The reminder is painful. She's quickly learning that she will never truly escape it, and there will never be a part of her that Brenner has not touched. That he has not damaged, maimed, and mutilated.

She can scarcely make it though a single day without thinking of the man that made her into a monster. There are marks on her skin that are reminders of him. There is a number on her wrist, scars on her body, and a bullet hole in the leg of the boy who saved her from him. She cannot escape the physical wounds, but this . . . this is completely different. Six is a reminder that El was not the only victim. She embodies a memory, a terrible nightmare. They wear identical scars. They are both damaged, both marked by the same man. The guilt, the sympathy, the sheer momentum of the situation threatens to consume her.

Sometimes scars run a little too deep.

Nine appears, out of the darkness. Seven clutches her hand, staring at El with wide eyes. El flinches, taking in their gaunt faces and shadowed eyes. Six turns, gestured to them.

"Nine and Seven." She says, introducing them. Nine bobs her head, frowning. Seven's face breaks into a wide smile as he gazes up at her.

El turns to Will, blinking at him.

"How . . . long?" She asks. Her voice is ragged from inuse, and barely a whisper.

"I don't know. Probably two or three days. We got you medicine. Antibiotics and fever reducers." Will tells her, holding up the little bottle of pills. El nods, sighing. She lifts her arm, winces as a sharp stab of pain shoots up the length of her wrist and elbow. The swelling has gone down, slightly. She's no longer shivering uncontrollably.

The fever has faded to a faint warmth in her cheeks and a slight layer of sweat on her forehead.

El leans back, letting her eyes close. She's completely drained of energy, exhausted from just a few minutes of consciousness.

"Thank you." She breathes, looking at the four of them through half-closed eyes. She says something else, but they don't quite catch it. And then she's gone again, pulled into her feverish delirium and unconsciousness. Will lets her be, relieved despite her apparent exhaustion. Already, the swelling has gone down. Already, she's showing signs of improvement. And it feels like he can breathe for the first time in days.

. . .

Mike sits up, bursting out of the water. He tears the bandana off his face, blinking wildly in the bright sun.

Dustin and Max are yelling, talking excitedly over one another, but he can't make sense of anything they're saying. His chest heaves as he fights for air. Suddenly, he's exhausted. His muscles are leaden, brain sluggish. Max helps him out of the pool, hands him a towel. He slumps against her shoulder as the ground lurches under his feet. He struggles to fight the dizziness, the nausea

"Dude, we heard her! Through the Super Com. We heard her, she's alive! She's okay!" Dustin says, excitedly.

"What did you see? Where is she?" Max insists, eyes wide. He gazes at them, expression stony.

"I couldn't see anything." He breathes, covering his face with his hands. "I could just hear her. I couldn't see her. I . . . didn't really talk to her."

Mike shakes his head again, brushing the damp locks of dark hair out of his eyes.

"I'm not . . . I'm not strong enough." He grimaces, turning away from them. He struggles to comprehend what just occurred. He made contact, and then he lost it. It happened in split seconds.

"Aw, c'mon, man. We'll just try again." Dustin says, putting a hand on his shoulder. Mike reaches for a dry t-shirt and pulls it over his head.

"Yeah." He says, tiredly. Mike watches them exchanged worried glances out of the corner of his eye. He's too tired to care, physically and mentally drained. The two continue to stare concernedly at him.

"We'll try again. We'll find her. " Max whispers gently, trying to reassure him.

"Yeah, we will." He echoes, wistfully. He wants to believe it.

...

Hopper leans back in his chair, rubbing his eyes. He gazes across the room. Flo is working feverishly, trying to file papers whilst typing up yet another incident report. An anxious woman with graying hair stands on the other side of the front desk, twisting a handkerchief in her hands. Davis is in the back, speaking with two military men. Powell is trying to reassure a young couple. Their four-year-old son has been missing for twelve hours.

There's a line out the door, anxious family members with reports of a missing loved one. Or, even more worrisome yet, a monster sighting. Terrifying creatures, reminiscent of the Demogorgon, are roaming their world.

The Pestilence has begun.

Military units armed with high caliber weapons scour the town. Three monsters, slimy, slug-like creatures with teeth and limbs, have been slaughtered already, taken into labs to be studied and tested. They used to be people.

The town is a wreck, shattered into pieces and hanging upside down. Things grow worse with each passing minute.

Hopper hasn't slept in seventy-two hours.

...

Mike, Nancy, and Holly sit in the living room. Holly sits cross-legged

on the floor, watching *Looney Tunes*. Mike is stretched out on the sofa, long legs hanging over the edge. Nancy is asleep, curled up on the La-Z-Boy. Their mother's anxious voice floats from the kitchen, arguing with their father. He can hear his father's voice, slightly angry, impatient.

Mike rolls over, pulling a pillow over his head, wishing everything would just fade away. He's nursing a bad headache from the kiddie pool incident earlier today, and all he really wants to do is sleep.

He almost succeeds until Holly gets up from her spot on the floor and climbs onto the couch with him.

"Hey, Hollywood." He mumbles, tiredly. She burrows into his chest.

She's still little. Only seven. Mike gazes at his little sister's tired eyes and frowns, a pang of guilt stabbing through his chest. All this anxiety and sadness is probably affecting her. He never really thought about it until now. She's been so good, barely asking for any attention. Mike realizes how mature she really is, especially for her age. A lot of things have happened, and she's been stuck in the middle. She hasn't complained.

Holly stares up at him, blue eyes blinking slowly. Her little hand reaches up and pats his hair, smoothing it down.

"How're you doing?" He asks. Holly regards him thoughtfully, sucking on her bottom lip.

"Okay. Mommy and Daddy are upset. Nancy's upset. You're upset."

"And you're not upset?" He says, gently.

"I miss Ellie." She says, simply. Mike swallows, nods.

"Me too."

Aloud knock interrupts them. Nancy jolts awake, looking around wearily. Mrs. Wheeler walks to the door, brow furrowed. She pulls open the door, and a voice Mike doesn't recognize greets her. Mike detaches himself from Holly and stands, wincing as his head throbs. He cranes his neck, trying to see around the door, but his mother

blocks his vision.

"I don't understand . . ." Mike hears her say, voice rising an octave. Mike crosses the room, goes to stand beside his mom. His mouth opens in surprise as his gaze lands on the group of military soldiers standing on the porch. The leader of the group smiles politely at him, shouldering his gun.

"May we come in?"

. . .

"I don't understand." His mother says, again. Her voice is shrill, her face pale. "You're forcing us to leave?"

They are gathered at the kitchen table. One soldiers, the one with the most authority, is seated across from Mike's parents. The others mill around the kitchen or else stand by the door like sentries.

"Yes, ma'am. It's no longer safe to stay here. A pandemic has begun in Hawkins. We must prevent the spread of this unfamiliar illness. We have orders from the United States Government to remove every civilian from Hawkins. We can provide you a safe place with food and clean water until this is over." The soldier says, calmly. He hands a piece of paper to Ted, who peers under his glasses to read it. Mike's father makes a small, noncommittal noise and says nothing, wordlessly handing the paper to Mrs. Wheeler.

"You can't do this. We have a right to know where you're taking us. I'm not leaving this house until you tell me exactly where we're going."

The soldier sighs and rubs a hand over the stubble on his chin

"Miss Wheeler, we're taking you to Riverside, a town just a couple miles away."

The soldier's gaze sweeps around the room.

"I suggest you pack your bags. You'll need to leave as soon as possible."

. . .

Mike throws his clothes in a bag, mind racing. He packs the Super Com, and a heavy-duty pocket knife that used to belong to his uncle. He's made a habit of carrying it around his pocket. With monsters crawling all over Hawkins, you can never be *too* prepared. He stuffs his favorite book, Stephen King's *It*, in his bag as well. Those government guys said they'd be there a while. His fingers find the Snow Ball photo, remaining in his jeans pocket from earlier this morning. He takes it out and unfolds it slowly, gazing down at El. She smiles as she kisses him.

How long ago was that? Three months? Four? It seems like a lifetime, and even then, Will was still bearing his sickness like a cross. And they were oblivious.

He pockets the photo and pulls on his shoes. He finds Holly in her room, trying to fit all of her Star Wars figurines in a tiny, pink backpack.

"Need help?" He offers, squatting down beside her. She nods, looking frustrated. Mike goes to her closet and pulls out a larger backpack. Her clothes and her figurines fit easily. He helps her put on her coat, then stoops to tie the laced on her sneakers.

"Ready?" He asks, offering his hand. She takes it.

"Ready."

Downstairs, Nancy and their parents are waiting for them. His mom is looking angry and afraid all at once. His father just looks confused.

"We're terribly sorry for this inconvenience. But this is a dangerous time. You can imagine how concerned we are for your safety." The soldier says.

"Yeah, I can imagine." Mike says bitterly, under his breath. He still doesn't trust them. Every time he looks at them, he sees Brenner, and he sees red.

"Are we ready to go?" He asks. His mom nods, looking teary. The soldiers escort them out the door and down the walk.

Outside, he sees the Blackburns and Sinclairs gathered around. Across the cul-de-sac, other families are being ejected from their homes. Mike grips the backpack a little tighter, squinting in the darkness. He gives Holly's hand a reassuring squeeze.

Lucas hobbles up to him, clutching his injured arm close to his body. He wears a sling, and his shoulder is bandaged. It's healing, slowly but surely.

"Mike, what's going on?" He asks, worriedly.

"I don't know." Mike says, shaking his head. "They just told us we needed to leave. You can't exactly argue with the military." He says, grimacing.

A soldier approaches them.

"You must get in a car. It will take you to the Riverside Medical Center." He says. As he speaks, multiple cars pull up along the sidewalk. Mike squints at him suspiciously.

"The hospital? Why?"

The soldier regards him with a hard stare.

"To be quarantined."

. . .

The soldiers lead Mike and his family up the steps of the hospital in Riverside. It's a couple miles away from Hawkins. The building itself is quite a bit larger than Hawkins' hospital. More rooms, more space to accommodate a lot of people. Mike follows the soldier, watching his feet as they cross the threshold and join the throng of anxious, confused people. Mike recognizes some of them. Some are his neighbors, his classmates. Others are strangers.

They are led into the lobby, where a young nurse with short, frizzy hair hands out surgical masks. Mike takes it from her hands and puts it on, turning to help Holly. His little sister gazes up at him with wide eyes, afraid and confused. Another man is taking belongings and bags, stacking them against the opposite wall. Mike takes off his pack

and hands it to him.

"Wait, what are you doing with our stuff?" Karen says, anxiously, clutching her bag to her chest.

"Your belongings will be returned to you shortly." He says, reassuringly. Mike rests his hand on his pocket, where the photo is folded and tucked away safely.

"You will be called individually to be assessed and assigned a room. Please keep calm and wait quietly until you hear your name." The nurse says. She opens a door to her left and leaves the room.

The buzz of conversation dies down a bit. Mike peers around. There's about forty people in the room. Small children cling to their mothers. Adults engage in whispered conversations, tight faces and tired eyes fixated on the walls, the floor.

The Sinclairs settle in chairs beside them. Lucas sits near his younger sister, Olivia, silent and impassive.

Mike drops into a chair beside Nancy and his mother, running a hand through his hair. Panic rises like bile in his throat. He knows he should keep his head, but this whole situation is so strange and messed up . . .

Quarantine. It's something from textbooks and sci-fi novels. They're planning to keep them here, separated from each other, under close supervision until they can determine the true nature of the sickness. The pestilence that began in the depths of the Upside Down . . .

The very thought makes him want to run for the door and never look back. To be away from Hawkins is to be away from the Gate, and El, and any hope of ever getting her back. And even though she's universes away, being in Hawkins makes it seem like she's closer.

"Emilia Anderson?"

Mike is jolted from his thoughts as the nurse enters the room, clutching a clipboard to her chest. A tall girl with long hair and a thin face stands up, ducking her head shyly. She can't be much older than him, though he doesn't recognize her. The nurse leads her through

the door, and it swings shut behind them.

And so Mike spends what feels like an eternity staring around the room, watching as the group grows steadily smaller. His mom leans over, pats his arm.

"It's going to be okay, honey." She says, softly, as if he were six instead of sixteen. Her eyes fill with tears.

His mind chases circles, trying to find some way out of this. But it's the government, and they can't really argue, can they? Mike thinks of Dustin and Max. He thinks of Joyce and Jonathan. They're his family too. Mike thinks of Hopper, and how much he wants to talk to him, what he would give to have just one conversation with the Chief . . .

He glances around the room, searching for a phone. He begins to consider pulling out the Super Com. Maybe if he can find the right channel . . .

"Michael Wheeler!" He's interrupted by the sound of his name. He looks up as the nurse's gaze falls on him. He gets to his feet and crosses the room, tugging at the strap of the surgical mask. His fingers brush against the rough stubble along his jawline. He could really use a shave.

"Michael?" The nurse says, questioningly. He nods. She peers down at her clipboard, clicking her pen absentmindedly.

"Alright, follow me." She says. She leads him through the door and down a wide hallway lined with small hospital rooms. She leads him into the nearest one, on the left.

The nurse shuts the door behind them, eye still glancing over her papers. Mike looks around the room. There's a small bed in the corner, and a bunch of monitors. There's a small window, and a vase of fake flowers. Finally, she looks at him, grinning broadly.

"I'll have you remove your shoes so I can get your weight." She says, gesturing to a scale in the corner. And thus begins an endless check-up. He is weighed and measured. She takes his blood pressure and pulse; She checks his eyes, ears, and throat.

After she's done with the basic examinations, she leads him into a separate room and sticks a needle in his arm, handing him a soft rubber ball to squeeze. He watches his own blood as it fills the tube, feeling suddenly lightheaded. His face drains of all color, and the lights seem to dim.

"Michael? Are you alright?" The nurse says, concernedly. He blinks, nodding.

"Yeah, I'm okay, it's just . . . the blood . . ." He trails off, finding it extremely difficult to form a coherent thought. And suddenly, he's realizing how exhausted he really is; His eyes sting, his muscles are leaden, and his mind is like a lump of cotton candy coated in molasses.

The nurse removes the needle and secures a cotton ball over the place where she stuck him. She pushes a bottle of water into his hand.

"Stay hydrated." She says. He nods and unscrews the cap, tipping it back. After a few minutes, the nausea fades.

The nurse does a few more tests, noting down every little abnormality and detail. The lumpy bullet-hole scar above his knee, the monster bite on his thigh, the faint divots and furrows on his face from the numerous beatings at the Exploratorium. the odd bend of his right thumb. He sprained it in third grade.

Everything.

She hands him a stack of clothing, a plain shirt and sweatpants provided by the hospital, and leads him into a room with a shower, telling him to freshen up. She leaves the room, giving him privacy. He peels off his clothes and steps in the shower, trying not to think about the situation, the implications, everything . . . It's all so strange.

The water is hot, and it relaxes his muscles. He runs a hand over his arm. His skin is dry and caked with salt from the kiddie pool. He scrubs his skin raw, suddenly feeling like it's the only way to remove the horrors of the past few months. He scrubs until his body is red

and angry, covered in marks from his own fingernails. It's obsessive and painful, but it eases the panic welling up inside him.

He steps out of the shower, expecting to feel better. He only feels worse. He sucks on his bottom lip, trying to keep his breathing even and steady.

Mike picks up the hospital clothes and fumbles with them, pulling them on with shaking fingers. They're comfortable and clean, soothing against his irritated skin.

The nurse enters, gesturing for him to follow. She leads him back into the other room. She makes a few more notes on her clipboard. Mike cranes his neck, trying to get a look. She turns her back on him, blocking his view. He sighs, averting his gaze.

After an eternity, she dismisses Mike and hands him a file folder, clicking her pen with finality.

"Go see the nurse down the hall. She'll assign you a room."

He leaves the room and approaches a little folding table at the end of the hall. The other nurse, a tall, older woman, takes the file folder from him and peers at it, eyes flicking over his face disinterestedly.

"Follow me." She says, voice muffled through her surgical mask. She leads him through another set of doors and down a small staircase. A wide hallway opens up, lined with doors. There's plastic compartments separating each entrance, creating a little buffer zone for disease and germs. Every door is branded with a "Biosecurity Hazard" sign. Another sign reads "Warning: Quarantine Zone" in bold letters.

People are beginning to occupy the small rooms. Nurses and doctors are milling around, checking monitors or talking with one another. Every single one of them wears some kind of protective gear: Masks, thick gloves and coats. Some are decked out in full-on hazmat suits. The sight makes him shiver.

The nurse leads him down the hall and into one of the last compartments at the end of the hall. Across the walkway, he spots

Nancy.

"Mike!" She calls, looking worried. She stands behind the plastic, fingers pressed up against it. Her voice is slightly muffled, her face drawn and fearful.

"Nance!"

"Where's mom and dad? Holly?" She says, peering down the hall.

"I don't know." He says.

"Your family is in the next compartment over. We like to keep families together, we just didn't have room for you over there. Don't worry yourselves too much." The nurse says. She gestures towards the door. Reluctantly, Mike steps inside the compartment. The nurse shuts the door and locks it behind him. He turns around in a circle, taking in the details of his room. No, scratch that . . . prison cell.

It's about ten feet long, eight feet wide. A small mattress lies along the far wall. A rolled-up sleeping bag sits on top of it, beside a neatly folded, fleece blanket with slightly fraying edges. There's a small toilet in the corner, and a sink with a brand-new toothbrush wrapped in plastic packaging. There's no windows and no phone, no way to contact the outside world.

Mike runs a hand through his hair, settling himself down on the mattress with his back against the wall. After a short while, there's a knock on the door. A nurse enters, carrying his backpack. Without a word, he sets it on the tiled floor and closes the door. Mike hears the lock click, and the man's fading footsteps. He gets up and crosses the room, retrieving his pack. He unzips it and sorts through his belongings. The knife is missing, along with his Super Com. Mike grinds his teeth in frustration, cursing under his breath.

They stole his only connection with the outside world, his only remaining means of communication. His last piece of El . . .

Wait, that's not true. He still has the photo. Mike fumbles for the picture in his pocket. His heart sinks as he realizes he changed clothes. The photo is in his jeans pocket, and he left them on the floor

in the other room . . .

Tears spring in his eyes, and he blinks them back. He's kicking himself for forgetting it. For being so careless.

"You really are an idiot, Wheeler." He says, under his breath. On impulse, he slams his fist against the wall. He steps back, suddenly dizzy. Blood wells up along the cuts, dripping down his wrist, pooling into the lines on his palm. He savors the pain, the sharp stinging. He sucks on his knuckles, tasting the blood. It's like pennies, or salt water. And he's seeing red.

A thousand emotions are raging inside him. Anger, for forgetting the photo. Fear, for his family and for Will and El. Grief . . . The ground lurches beneath his feet, and he can't focus or even breathe properly. The room is too small, like a cage, a closet, a prison.

He slumps onto the mattress, watching his blood drip onto the tiled floor. He recalls another pair of split knuckles, and a certain, brown-eyed, bloody-nosed girl. He recalls a too-big Fleetwood Mac t-shirt that fell just above her knees. He recalls unkempt hair and a twisted smile and tear tracks on pale cheeks. And the scent of her, snowfall and maple syrup.

She is bottled lightning. A free fall. A fire. A flood.

His beginning and his end. His greatest distraction, his ultimate downfall.

He falls asleep staring at the ceiling, cradling his bleeding hand, watching the sleepy procession of shadows as they waltz across the ceiling.

. . .

Mike spends the better part of a week there, in that cramped hospital room. Each day, he grows more restless, fed-up with the meager living space and the lack of connection to the outside world. He receives three meals day, brought in on a plastic tray by a faceless nurse with a mask and gloved hands. It's bland hospital food, some sort of sandwich or piece of chicken and potatoes, a small serving of

fruits or vegetables. A bottle of water. His appetite often escapes him. Mike forces himself to eat, though, trying to keep his strength.

The days blend into one another. He's thankful for his watch, which counts down the seconds and minutes and days as they crawl drunkenly onward, painfully slow. He sleeps for long periods of time, exhausted and grief-stricken.

His slumber is riddled with strange dreams, interrupted by nightmares. Old memories resurface. He visits ordinary days. He hears drowning, distant voices. He can pick out a few, obscure memories. Playing with a little toy train on the carpeted floor of his grandparent's house; standing on his tiptoes, struggling to reach the sink; his great aunt's funeral; a brawl in the locker room: Mike vs. Troy and his entire band of mouth-breathing bullies with intelligence scores of zero. He was ten. It ended with a broken nose, a chipped tooth, and lots of tears.

There are memories of El. The two of them, spread out on a grassy hillside, staring at the sky; Interlaced fingers; A hospital bed, a closet, and static; A visit to McDonald's at two in the morning; Star Wars and D&D on Saturdays. Train tracks and fallen leaves and freezing lakes and roller coasters and lazy days on sunny porches and basement sofas and rain-dampened asphalt . . .

They're small fragments, strange little pieces of his life. Some ordinary, some monumental. Some happy, some sad, some bittersweet . . . He's not even sure some of them are real. When he falls asleep, they play behind his eyes like a roll of film.

When he's not sleeping, he eats, he stares at the walls. He turns the pages of Stephen King's *It*, reading the same sentence over and over again. He can't breathe in here. He needs to get out, and get some fresh air. How many days has it been? Three? Four? Ten? He doesn't know. He only knows it's 4:06 AM and he's wide awake, woken by another nightmare. A nightmare featuring blood stains and dark hallways and tortured children. He reaches into his consciousness, brushing against El's mind, grounding himself in her presence. She doesn't respond. He doesn't expect her to.

31. Cages

Hopper stares straight ahead, scraping his tongue over his teeth, trying to ignore the frustration, the pounding in his head. A bunch of government guys came to the police station that night, the night of the evacuation. They claimed jurisdiction, and tried to take him to a "secure facility" to be monitored, quarantined like some diseased animal. He tried to fight them, and they knocked him out.

And he woke up here. In a fucking jail cell. Sort of.

It's an extremely small hospital room, with no windows and a single door shrouded in plastic for "biosecurity reasons".

He's been here a few days. And he's going absolutely crazy.

They took his gun, his walkie.

He paces the length of the cell again, itching for a cigarette, yelling even though he knows it's useless. There's nobody out there to save his sorry ass.

Repetitive, almost obsessive, thoughts bounce around in his brain, refusing to go away, swimming to the surface like little mammalian creatures coming up for air.

Those kids, still stuck in the Upside Down as far as he knows.

The Wheeler kid, who's about two steps from falling off the edge.

Joyce, who's got her toes hanging over the edge already, swaying, ready to jump . . .

And those fucking government officials, who run around like they own the show, manipulating twenty-thousand people as if they're all puppets on strings.

Hopper won't stand for it. He pounds his fist against the door, yelling until his voice is ragged.

He should keep it together. But he can't and he's going crazy and

perhaps he's closer to the edge than he thinks . . .

. . .

El takes the pills out of Will's palm, tossing them back with a quick sip of water. Will smiles, encouragingly.

"You feeling better, Ellie?"

"Yes." She croaks, voice ragged from inuse. She smiles.

It's true. She's improving. Slightly. While she's still exhausted and feverish, the swelling around the wound on her arm is diminishing. It's no longer so irritated and shiny, but it still has a reddish tinge. There's not as much pus. Still, it's not a pretty sight.

She's coherent, maintaining consciousness and even conversation. It's been five days since she first got the antibiotics into her system. The pills keep the fever down, the water and the canned goods satisfy her basic needs. They're never totally safe, especially here, but the secure room and the presence of the other test subjects makes it bearable. They're patient with her, and they seem to understand. They share a deeper, darker connection with El. The numbers on their wrists are proof of it. And though none of them mention anything, they're undoubtedly thinking of the painful days stuck in this place, under the devilish stare of Dr. Brenner and his comrades.

Six, Seven, and Nine never escaped. Not really.

Six approaches the bed and pats her arm. Like El, Six is a woman of few words, a side-effect of the lab. She's quiet and damaged, but instinctively maternal. With a pang, El thinks of Terry, sort of surprised to find how much she wants to feel her own mother's gentle touch.

El averts her eyes, pushing the thought from her mind. It's become a habit, trying to forget them, her loved ones. Releasing them like birds out of cages, pushing the memories from her mind because it's too painful to face. She knows it's unlikely she'll ever make it out of here. The thought of losing them is unbearable. Forgetting is easier. That way, she doesn't miss them, and it doesn't hurt so much. But there's

one person who's determined to stay.

Mike. His name is constantly on her mind. Not just a name, a face, a voice, constellations of freckles and a scrunched up nose and a wild mess of dark curls. A promise.

She can't seem to let him go.

"Do you want to stand?" Will asks her. El nods.

He jumps up and helps her off the bed. She's unsteady on her feet. El feels along the mossy wall, wrapping her other arm around Will's neck to keep herself upright. She blinks, inhaling sharply through her nose, trying to stop the room from spinning. Will helps her out the door and down the hall. It's been routine for them, these little excursions through the hallways. It helps clear her head and exercises the muscles in her legs. Anything to keep her strength up.

El leans heavily on him, cradling her injured arm, looking around. She wills the hallways to dissolve. She'd rather be anywhere but here. Every corner they turn triggers another wave of bad memories. She counts her breaths, and Mike's mental presence anchors her. Will's voice, too, helps to call her back. El forces herself to keep putting one foot in front of the other, venturing down the dank hallways, building her strength.

The Gate to the Rightside Up has a single key. Eenie meenie miney mo . . . She's it. She's got to get Will out of here. She's gotta get him home.

This is the only way.

. . .

Twelve days. Mike has been here for twelve days. Twelve. Fucking. Days. Or so the nurse told him when she brought his breakfast.

He paces the room, scraping his fingernail along the wall, bored out of his mind. He sits down, picks up his book, puts it down again. He bites his fingernails, a habit he broke in third grade but picked up again in the last couple days. If he had a pencil, he'd be gnawing on the end of that, too. His friends always tease him about it.

It's absolute insanity, here. There's no contact with the outside world. He's spoken a sum of exactly ten words since his arrival here, mostly to the nurses that bring his lunch tray. There's only the watch on his arm and the scheduled meal times. There's 445,134 words of a novel, an extra change of clothes, and the memory of a photograph.

He presses his fingers over his eyelids, settling himself on the floor. He rests his head on the wall, swallowing hard.

"El." He says her name, aloud, adding another word to his tiny collection. His voice is rough, barely audible.

After a few minutes, he drifts off.

. . .

Mike wakes to a sharp rapping on the door. He sits up, mumbling groggily, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He checks his watch. It's late afternoon. A nurse opens the door, her smile concealed by the surgical mask over her mouth.

"Today's a big day! Your tests came back normal, and you haven't shown any signs of illness. You've officially passed our quarantine period." She says, cheerfully.

"You're letting me leave?" Mike says, voice tinged with doubt, disbelief.

"Yes. Pack your belongings. Someone will come to retrieve you when it's time."

"Where are you taking me?"

The nurse's smile fades.

"You can't go back to Hawkins. The whole town's been evacuated. You'll be taken to a secure area until it's safe for you to return home." The nurse tells him, slowly. Mike shakes his head, frustrated.

"I have to go home." He says, voice taking on a pleading tone. He thinks of El and the Gate and Hopper and everything he left behind .

..

"You can't. It's forbidden."

"On whose orders?"

"By the order of the U.S. Government, Mr. Wheeler. I'm sorry."

Mike could scream. Heat rises to his cheeks, and he bites back the bitter taste rising in his throat.

"What about my family?" He says, hollowly.

"Your family will be accompanying you." The nurse says. Mike steps back, falling silent. The nurse leaves. Something inside Mike stirs him to action. He rushes around the small room, picking up his dirty clothes, his book, and his toothbrush, shoving it all in his pack. He waits, head spinning, until a different nurse opens his door and gestures for him to follow. Mike follows the nurse out the door and through the plastic barriers, looking around.

Other people are emerging from their rooms. Some people look disheveled and angry, some frightened; most people seem happy to be rid of their tiny hospital rooms. People rush around, looking for family members, calling out to one another. Mike immediately spots Nancy's willowy figure amongst the crowd. She wraps him in a tight hug, sighing in relief.

"Oh, thank god. Mike," She says, ruffling his hair. "I was losing my mind in there." She shakes her head fretfully. Mike nods.

"Me too."

Nancy gazes up at him, still unused to his height. He towers a good foot above her. At least. She forces a smile.

"You need a shave." She says, meekly. Mike chuckles, unconsciously running a hand over the stubble on his chin. He sticks close to her side, scanning the crowd for any signs of their parents or Holly. Finally, he catches sight of his little sister's blond pigtails.

"Holly!" He shouts. She turns around, eyes lighting up as she recognizes him. Mike's gaze lands on his mother, standing beside Holly, and his dad, not far away. He tugs on Nancy's sleeve, pushing

through the crowd to reach them. His mother gives a little shriek, covering her mouth. She gathers Mike into a bone-crushing hug, then turns to Nancy, choking back tears.

"Oh my god, I thought they were g-gonna keep us here f-forever . . . oh my god . . . Mike, Nancy . . . oh, thank god . . ." She chokes, words all jumbled together. She hugs them again, planting kisses on their cheeks. Ted steps forward, thumping Mike on the back.

"We're glad you kids are okay." He says, good-naturedly, seemingly unruffled by the situation.

"Thanks, Dad." Mike says, tiredly.

The crowd begins to funnel through the double doors. Mike walks alongside his mother, holding Holly's hand.

An official awaits them, standing in the doorway at the end of the corridor. He's unfamiliar, probably in his sixties, wrinkled and balding. His hand rests casually on the pistol holster on his hip, gaze sweeping across the sea of faces. His gaze lingers on Mike a second too long. Mike's stomach twists uncomfortably. He shivers.

"Hawkins is currently uninhabitable. It's a danger zone. Until it is safe, you cannot return to your homes." The man group falls into an uproar. The man raises both hands, palms facing out as if surrendering, trying to regain control of the crowd. Eventually, people quiet down, though a few whispered conversations carry on. The man raises his voice above the din.

"You will be taken to a secure facility, a couple miles south of here. There, you will be provided food, water, and comfortable living spaces. You will remain there until further notice. In the meantime, you will be assigned various duties to assist in the accommodations." The man's gaze flicks over the crowd, his jaw set. The lines gathered at the corners of his eyes and between his brows seem to deepen considerably.

"I am terribly sorry for this inconvenience." He says, though his voice is devoid of any sympathy.

All around Mike, people are whispering, looking anxious. Holly clutches his hand tightly, looking frightened. Nancy stares at the floor, lips pressed together in a thin line.

The man leads them out of the hospital where several school buses await them. Mike ushers his family towards the nearest one, Holly in toe, followed by Nancy and his parents. They settle themselves in the back of the bus. Mike sets his pack on his lap, hugging it to his chest. Holly crawls into their mother's lap, fingers curling around the collar of her shirt.

It takes several minutes for everyone to board the buses. There are a lot more than the group he saw in the lobby when they first arrived here. At least two hundred. There are children, elderly couples, young adults and families. All wearing the same mask of unease and apprehension.

Mike leans his cheek against the window, watching the people as they file past, trying to find loved ones, forcing their way through the crowded walk. Mike stares until their faces blur, and he can't discern one figure from the next. He tries to make himself feel something. He just feels . . . empty. He's too exhausted, too heartsick, to feel any sort of fear. He's been tossed around before. What's one more cage to be thrown into? What's one more maelstrom of doubt and lies?

Vaguely, he wonders where they're going. His mind wanders to Lucas and Dustin and Max. Hopper, Joyce. Where are they? The hospital wasn't that big. And Lucas was with Mike when they were brought here. Mike scans the diminishing crowd outside the window, searching for his friend. His heart sinks. He doesn't remember seeing him when they left . . .

And El, Will. He's been so useless. So fucking useless. And he's farther away from them now than he's ever been. If he can't get to the Gate, how can he possibly hope to find them? And they took his Super Com away. Those fuckers . . .

He despises these government people, with their suits and guns and lies. And he knows they're all just following orders. And there's a Man, with a gigantic capital-M. Not Brenner, but a carbon copy of him. Some faceless puppet with a big mouth, handing out orders,

eliminating any opposition. Worse than anything the Upside Down can ever spit at them. A man who deals in secrecy and lies and betrayal. A man with no regard for human life. A man who's willing to put children through lab experiments to get what he wants.

He wants to let go of the hate in his heart. But one look at El, at the ghosts that live in her eyes, the tears that stain her cheeks on cold winter nights at three in the morning . . . one glance, one explosion. And all he sees is red.

She looks in the mirror and sees a monster. He looks at her and sees all that is good and beautiful in the world. They took her family and her childhood. They stole her name and gave her a number. They are the reason for the scars. They're the reason she locks herself in closets and wakes up screaming at demons that exist only in her head. And he will never stop hating them.

. . .

The "secure facility" is actually a large hotel, near the center of town. Government employees stand at every entrance, watching closely as the people from the hospital are assigned rooms and various volunteer shifts. Mike's family is assigned a room on the fourth floor, in the east wing. They squeeze into an elevator with some of their neighbors, familiar faces from town. They utter hasty greetings, hurrying out of the elevator when they arrive at their floor. There's tension in the air. Everyone's on edge. He doesn't blame them. Small town people aren't used to monsters or mysterious quarantine rooms.

The hotel room is cramped, with two beds and a tiny bathroom. There's a small window, on the wall opposite the doorway. Still, it's a major improvement from the hospital room.

Tense silence hangs over his family. His father is quiet and absent minded, per usual. Immediately, he takes a seat on the edge of a bed and grabs a magazine from the bedside table, humming a little tune under his breath. Karen glares at him and opens her mouth to say something. She decides against starting an argument, instead taking her stress and frustration out on her children.

"Mike, honestly, go take a shower. You stink. And shave, while you're

in there. We're not hooligans!" She growls, reaching over to straighten his shirt. She turns to Nancy, her face hardening. "Nance, help me unpack the bags, we're going to be here a while . . ."

Mike sighs, knowing it's better not to protest. He tropes into the bathroom and closes the door. He can still hear her fretting, even through the door. He rolls his eyes, glad to escape for just a moment. Barely even two hours together and they're already at each other's throats.

Mike turns on the faucet, letting the water run. He slumps against the counter, covering his face with his hands. In the mirror, he stares at himself through the cracks between his fingers, searching for any sign of the person he was three months ago. That Mike is dead. Gone. Now, the only thing left is an empty shell.

Sudden terror, a sort of hysteria, overcomes him for a moment. He looks away from his reflection and stares into the porcelain sink, taking deep breaths through his nose. These panic attacks have been happening sporadically for a while now. And sometimes he think it might be because of her. El. They're connected. He feels what she feels. He tries not to think about it. It'll only drive him insane.

His fingernails dig into the skin of his wrist as his world careens out of control. He sinks, knees hitting the floor.

He's falling apart. Falling, falling, falling . . .

. . .

A dining hall of sorts has been set up for the former quarantine patients. It's on the bottom floor, just to the side of the lobby. There are several long tables, and a section on one side that serves food. The food is a definite improvement. It's not anything fancy, but it's not the bland hospital food either.

Mike finds himself picking over a large selection of donuts that next morning, yawning, blinking sleep from his eyes. Nancy accompanies him, fingers wrapped around a small styrofoam coffee cup, taking tiny sips. Mike piles several glazed donuts onto a paper plate, glancing back at his sister.

"You hungry?" He says, cocking an eyebrow. Nancy shakes her head. Mike shrugs, walking over to an empty table. Nancy follows close behind. She takes a seat beside him, still clutching her coffee with both hands.

"We need to get back home." She says softly, after a while.

"I know." Mike says, through a mouthful of donut. Nancy shoots him a repulsed look, rolling her eyes, and keeps talking.

"She feels so far away. El. And I don't trust these guys."

"I don't, either."

"What if this parasite thing is just a hoax?" Nancy says, bitterly. Mike shakes his head.

"It's not. I saw what happened to that kid, and what happens to Will. Nancy, it's real." Mike says, firmly. "But the quarantine thing. The evacuation . . . I don't know. It's weird."

"Do you think they moved the entire town? That's impossible."

"It's possible. They probably have places like this all over the county. They're just shoving us aside so they can cover their tracks." Mike leans back, crumpling up his napkin and tossing it on his plate. Nancy looks at him, thoughtfully.

"I want to talk to Hopper. He'll have answers. He always does. He-"

"Wheeler!"

Mike turns around, toward the direction of his name. Dustin is barreling toward him, grinning broadly. Mike's spirits soar as he catches sight of his friend. Dustin throws his arms around Mike, crushing him in a hug. Mike laughs, tugging playfully at his hat.

"How's it going, man?" Mike asks, smiling.

"This is insanity!" Dustin says, loudly. "It's utter insanity." He shakes his head, eyes wild.

"Did they put you in quarantine?" Mike asks him.

"Yeah, they did." Dustin says, looking exasperated. "Insanity . . ." He mutters, under his breath.

"Have you seen Max?"

Mike shakes his head, taking a quick glance around.

"No, I haven't."

A shadow of worry crosses Dustin's face. He looks around, craning his neck to scan to the room.

"What about Lucas?"

"He was with us, at the hospital. I haven't seen him since they took us there." Mike says, uneasily. Dustin swallows, looking fearful.

"You don't think . . ."

"No." Mike says, firmly. "He's okay. I probably just missed him."

Dustin's eyes land on a donut on Mike's paper plate. He shoots Mike a pleading look. Mike shrugs, and he crams it into his mouth. Nancy glares at him, lip curling in disgust.

"What? I'm a stress eater." Dustin says, reproachfully, bits of bread and frosting falling out of his mouth as he talks. Nancy rolls her eyes, raising her coffee to her lips.

Mike excuses himself to find a restroom. He leaves the dining room, walking across the deserted lobby. He turns the corner, almost crashing into a tall man dressed in a suit.

"Sorry." Mike mumbles, jumping out of the way.

"Actually, I was hoping I'd run into you down here, Mr. Wheeler." The man says, smiling. It doesn't reach his eyes. Mike's stomach twists in a knot.

"Uh, do I know you?"

"No, you wouldn't." He sighs. "Walk with me, will you?"

Mike looks at the man, swallowing hard.

"Uh, actually, I really . . . uh, I should be getting back to my room." He stammers, struggling to get the words out.

"Oh, good. I think the elevator is this way." The man gestures down the hall. Mike has no choice but to make his way to the elevator. The man falls into step beside him. Mike starts to panic, breath catching in his throat. His mind runs a million miles a minute. He watches his feet, keeping his eyes determinedly averted.

The guy's a government official. Mike would bet his life on it. What does he want?

Mike hits the button, shoving his hands deep in his jacket pockets.

"How is this place treating you, Michael?" The man says, politely.

"Fine." Mike says, through gritted teeth.

"I'm glad. It could be a long while before you're allowed to return to Hawkins."

Mike says nothing. Beads of sweat appear on his forehead and upper lip. He resists the urge to wipe it away, trying to keep his composure.

He tries to think of a way out of this situation. He could call for help. There's no one around. He could pretend to get in the elevator and then get out at the last second . . . He's probably not quick enough. He could get in the elevator and actually see what this guy wants from him. All three options seem equally lousy.

The elevator dings, and the doors slide open. Empty. He decides on the latter, fighting the urge to turn and run as he steps into the elevator, followed closely by the man. The doors slide shut, and the elevator shudders and begins to move.

The man reaches into the folds of his jacket. Mike tenses, stepping back. He draws out a small badge.

"I'm with the United States Department of Homeland Security." He says. "Michael, we have reason to believe you've been closely involved with some of the strange events that have happened in Hawkins recently."

"Yeah?" Mike says, hollowly. "What makes you think that?"

The man ignores him.

"Michael, what is your relationship with Jane Ives?"

Mike's heart drops through the floor. His mouth is suddenly dry, and sweat clings to his palms and forehead.

"Uh, I-I don't . . . I don't know what you're talking about." He splutters, throat constricting. His hands curl into fists, fingernails biting into his palms.

"I think you know exactly what I'm talking about." The man says. The polite tone has vanished. His voice is dangerously low. Mike doesn't reply. The man reaches into his suit, this time pulling out a folded piece of paper. Carefully, he unfolds it, handing it to Mike.

Mike's blood freezes. He takes the paper with shaking fingers.

It's the Snow Ball photo. The one he left in his jeans pocket. The candid shot of El kissing his cheek. In the photo, her arms are slung around his neck. And there on her forearm, clear as day, the number 011 etched in black ink. It's hard to miss, if you know where to look.

Mike feels like he's going to be sick. He brushes his fingertips over the photograph.

The elevator shudders to a stop, and the doors slide open. The man steps in front of the door, blocking Mike's path.

"I'm going to ask you one more time." The man says, slowly, licking his lips. "What is your relationship with Jane Ives?"

32. Convergence

"What do you want?" Mike growls, trying to keep his composure.

"Mr. Wheeler, eight people have lost their lives to the pestilence spreading through Hawkins. We have reason to believe Jane Ives is directly involved, given her . . . ah . . . abilities."

Mike clenches his jaw, looking the man in the eyes.

"Abilities?" He repeats, dumbly.

"Don't play dumb with me." The man snaps, eyes flashing. "We have case files and documents, extensive evidence of MK Ultra and everyone involved. All that, against the word of a sixteen-year-old kid. Tread carefully, Wheeler."

"What do you want?" Mike says, hoarsely. The corners of the man's mouth twitch, and his lips press together in a thin line. He moves his hand so it rests on the pistol holster on his hip. Mike fidgets uncomfortably.

"Mr. Wheeler," the man begins, fixing him with a threatening glare. He chooses his words carefully, tasting them on his tongue. "I want to know where she is."

. . .

"Excuse me, sir?"

Mike cranes his neck, spotting a young woman waiting outside the elevator. A toddler is perched on her hip.

"Oh, I'm very sorry, m'am." The government agent says, politely. He moves out of the way, straightening his collar with an air of nonchalance.

He turns to Mike, giving him a pat on the arm. It takes everything in Mike's power not to flinch away from his touch.

"Until we meet again, Michael. It was a pleasure." He says,

disappearing behind a jovial, cheery facade

Mike forces a smile, matching the man's formal politeness. The man exits the elevator and disappears around the corner, leaving Mike staring after him, the photo clutched in his fist. Mike blows out a long breath, slumping back against the wall. His head spins, and a wave of nausea overcomes him for a long moment.

They know about El. Hopper didn't destroy all the case files, after all. And now they think she's to blame for all the bad stuff happening in Hawkins. They're going to find her and lock her up or worse . . .

"Honey, are you alright?" The woman says, looking at him concernedly. He blinks in surprise, meeting her eyes.

"Yes, I'm fine." He assures her, brushing away her concern with a wave of his hand. He realizes he must look stupid and obviously not fine, so he straightens up, subconsciously running a hand through his hair. He takes another deep breath.

"What floor?"

"First."

When the elevator lets him off, he takes off running through the lobby and into the dining area. Many people shoot dirty looks at him as he almost knocks over two little kids and a hotel employee carrying a tray of dirty silverware. He forces himself to maintain a brisk walk, trying to ignore the stares and the frantic thudding of his heart. It's so loud he's sure every single person in the room can hear it, hammering against his rib cage.

He finds Dustin on the other side of the room. He tugs on his friend's sleeve, frantic and distracted.

"Dude, I need to talk to you. You wouldn't believe . . ." He trails off, eyes widening in surprise and disbelief as he catches sight of the person sitting in the seat next to him, frizzy red hair sticking up all over the place, eyes alight . . .

"Max?" He yelps. She laughs, getting up from her seat. She throws her arms around him, pulling him into a tight hug. She steps away,

ruffling his dark curls.

"What are you doing here?" He says, happily.

"Oh, I'm here 'cause some mouth-breathing government guys decided to throw me in a cage for a week."

"They quarantined you, too?"

"They quarantined everybody. I just got here this morning, though. It took them a while to comb through Hawkins. They're keeping people in a bunch of places all over the county. Everyone between your house and mine is here. People that lived nearer to downtown, like El's family, are over in Roane City. And Hopper lived out by the lake. I have no idea where he could be." She says, pursing her lips.

"Is Joyce here? Jonathan?" Mike says, anxiously.

"I don't know."

"What about Lucas?"

Mike's stomach does a backflip.

"He was with me, the night they took us to the hospital. I haven't seen him since . . ."

Max glances at Dustin, swallowing hard. Mike's attention is drawn to a young man, probably in his early twenties, seated behind Max. He stands and clears his throat, loudly. Max's eyes grow cold. She turns to the man, then looks back at Mike and Dustin.

"Guys, this is my step-brother, Billy." She says, monotonously. She does not smile.

Billy saunters over to them, wearing a haughty half-smile. He's a couple inches shorter than Mike, broad shouldered and broad chested, with slicked-back, dirty blonde hair.

He offers his hand to Mike, and he takes it, meeting Billy's eyes. His sharp gaze lingers on Mike, cold and uninviting, for a few moments. Mike can detect a the sour scent of alcohol on his breath and finds

himself wondering how he managed to smuggle it here.

Billy turns to shake Dustin's hand, then steps back. He slings an arm across Max's shoulders. She swallows, stiffening.

"Max, you never told me you actually have friends." He says, rudely. He turns toward her, ruffling her hair. There's a slight slur in his words. She shies away, quickly disentangling herself from his grasp.

Mike narrows his eyes, suddenly defensive. He opens his mouth to say something, but Dustin beats him to it.

"Yeah, Max is one of us." Dustin snaps.

"Well, personally, I wouldn't be going around bragging about the fact that I hang out with Hawkins' biggest nerds and losers. What are you, Chunky, leader of the A.V. club?" He gestures to Dustin. Dustin blushes, sputtering as he searches for a witty comeback.

"Actually, I am." Dustin gets out, finally, voice faltering.

Billy snickers, the corners of his mouth twitching. He turns to Mike, smirking.

"Hey, man. Back off." Mike says, darkly.

"Why don't you pick on someone your own size? Like maybe . . . the Eiffel Tower? Tell me, do you get good satellite reception up there?" Billy growls, glaring at Mike.

"Billy, stop it!" Max cries, face flushing. "You're drunk."

"Take some advice from me, Max-A-Million, and stay away from these losers."

"You're such an asshole." Max says, angrily. Tears well in her eyes.

Billy's face contorts, and he draws back his fist, lurching toward her.

Mike steps forward, firmly planting himself between Max and her older brother. Billy pauses, looking very much like he wants nothing more than to kick the crap out of Mike. His fist clenches, and veins

pop out along his neck and temple. Finally, he drops his hand, thinking better of it.

Maybe it's the extra height. More likely, though, it's the presence Mike possesses. The preternatural strength, the way in which he carries himself. He has a certain, quiet power. And he has no idea.

Mike folds his arm across his chest, biting back the bad taste in his mouth. A storm of dark, brooding anger dwells in his coffee-colored irises.

Max shoots him a gratified look, wiping tears from her cheeks.

"C'mon, guys." Dustin says, coolly, wrapping a comforting arm around her shoulder. They turn their backs on him, making their way towards the double doors.

"Nice to meet you!" Dustin calls over his shoulder, in a falsely sweet voice.

Max shakes her head, looking distraught.

"I swear, one day, I'm gonna . . ." She growls, cracking her knuckles

"Easy, now. We can't have you committing murder." Dustin says, chuckling. Max's brow furrows.

"He's just . . . he's such a douchebag. All the time!" She says, furiously, cheeks still glittering with tears.

"Yeah, he kinda is." Mike says, nodding. Max's mouth twitches.

Mike feels like he's looking at her from an entirely different angle.

A wave of concern washes over him. Her gaze lands on him, then flits away. Billy was so quick to make a move toward her . . . Rage swells in his chest, so powerful it almost scares him. The kind of rage he usually exclusively feels towards Brenner's men. He opens his mouth, closes it again, clenching his teeth.

Does he hit you?

He's finding hard to ignore the question. He's finding it equally difficult to ask it. So it lingers in the back of his throat, bulging and big and burning. He tries to swallow it.

Does he hurt you? Does he hit you? Does he

They ride the elevator. Max mutters under her breath angrily as they make their way down the hall, plotting murder.

Mike stops suddenly, slapping his palm to his forehead.

"I almost forgot . . ." He cries, looking at the two of them. Dustin blinks at him, perplexed.

"Forgot what?"

Mike glances down the hallway, fidgeting nervously.

"I'll tell you in a minute. Let's just . . . get out of the hallway."

They arrive at Dustin's room, which is only a couple doors down from Mike's. He fumbles in his pockets for the room key, then opens the door. Dustin's family is still downstairs, eating breakfast. Their absence leaves an empty room, a safe, quiet place to talk. Max turns around, folding her arms across her chest, cocking an eyebrow.

Mike recounts the elevator incident, and his mysterious companion. Max turns a shade paler, and Dustin gasps, looking back and forth between the two.

"They're looking for her? What the hell? This can't be happening . . . Not again!" Dustin says, loudly, waving his arms.

"I know." Mike says, bitterly. "He followed me into the elevator and trapped me there. He was being all creepy and mysterious."

"How do they even know about her? I thought Hopper destroyed all the evidence?"

"Apparently, he didn't. They knew all about her powers, and MK Ultra." Mike says. "And they had a picture. I had a picture of her, of us, and you could see her tattoo in it. That's how they knew they

needed to find me. Because I was in the picture with her." Mike explains, voice tight. Dustin wrings his hands, beginning to pace.

"Well, the good news is she's still in the Upside Down."

"That's good news?" Mike snaps, angrily. Dustin meets his gaze evenly, brow furrowing.

"Yeah, it is. Because you of all people know that those guys are way worse than anything in the Upside Down. The lab is worse. Way worse."

Mike falls silent. Dustin is right. He'd take the Demogorgon over Brenner without hesitation. He thinks of the scar on his leg and the tattoo on her wrist and everything they've done to her . . . No. No more. He can't think of that now. He's going to fall down a hole. Probably already has.

"What do we do?" Max says, quietly.

"Nothing." Mike whispers. He stares at the floor, moving the toe of his shoe in slow circles over the carpet. "We can't do a damn thing."

. . .

Mike lies on the bed, feet propped up against the pile of pillows by the headboard. Dustin is sprawled on the floor, thumbing through a comic. Max lies next to him, attempting to braid strands of his curly hair. Mike stares at the ceiling, listening to his friends' whispers and occasional giggles, letting himself drift in that soft space between sleep and waking.

Again, he gives her a mental nudge. She's there. He can feel her presence, faintly. He breathes a sigh of relief.

They've been here for a few hours, enjoying each other's company, trying to stay out of the way of family members and government officials and, well, pretty much everybody.

Eventually, they decide to stretch their legs. Max leads the way down. Every corner they turn, Mike expects to find that government agent. But the hallways are empty, and nobody bothers them. Next to the

dining room, there's a little exercise center. They walk in, exploring the equipment. Mike, disinterested with the whole thing, watches from the wall as Dustin picks up a fifteen-pound dumbbell and starts lifting it, wiggling his eyebrows at Max.

"I didn't know you lift." Max says, sarcastically.

"Yeah, I pretty much need to carry around a concealed weapons license." Dustin says, wearing a goofy smile. He flexes his (non-existent) biceps. Mike snorts, rolling his eyes. Max shoots him a look, then turns her attention back to Dustin.

"Those are guns? I thought they were cinnamon rolls."

"Hey!" Dustin says, pouting. "You don't believe me?"

"I believe you . . ." Max says, unconvincingly.

"Try me!" Dustin insists.

"Fine, bet you can't lift the fifty." She says.

"Oh yeah? Watch me." Dustin says, puffing out his chest. He picks up the fifty with a bit of trouble, his cheeks puffed out as he lifts it.

"Aha!" He cries, triumphantly. Max raises her eyebrows, impressed. He cocks his eyebrow and promptly drops it on his foot.

"Fuck!" He cries, grabbing his toe. Max rushes forward, closely followed by Mike.

"Ow ow ow ow." He whines, eyes watering.

"That's what you get for showing off, and, you know . . . lying about working out." Mike says, chuckling. Dustin makes a rude gesture at him, grimacing.

"Not really what I need to hear at the moment, Mikey." He says, sarcastically. He turns to Max, eyes screwed up against the pain. "It's definitely broken." He says, his voice high.

"Let's take your shoe off so we can see the damage." Max suggests.

Carefully, she unties the laces of his shoe and eases it off his foot. Two of his toes are already blackened, and one of his toenails is cracked and bleeding.

"Holy shit." Dustin says, gazing at his foot with wide eyes. "They're gonna have to cut it off." He cries.

"Oh, don't be such a baby." Max says, rolling her eyes. "You're gonna be fine. I don't even think it's broken." She says, gently probing the bones in his toes.

"Ow!" He says, loudly. He winches. She ignores him, shaking her head.

"Let's get him up." She says. Together, Mike and Max help Dustin to his feet. They leave the exercise room, supporting Dustin between them. He limps and complains the whole way to the elevator. Max rolls her eyes, and Mike just laughs.

As they round the corner, they stop in their tracks, finding themselves face to face with . . .

"Lucas!" Mike yells throwing his arms around his friend. Lucas grins broadly, slapping him on the back.

"Wheeler!" He yells, happily. "Henderson! I've been looking everywhere for you guys!"

"When did you get here?"

"About a half an hour ago. They kept me a little longer because of my arm. They knew it was a monster that got me. They wanted to run more tests and make sure I wasn't gonna 'turn on them' or some shit." He says, rolling his eyes.

Lucas' arm has improved. He no longer wearing a sling, and he seems to have better use of it. The scar tissue is healing, and the wound is fully closed.

Lucas turns to Max, pats her on the arm.

"Hey, Max. It's good to see you." He says, gently. "Looks like we're all

here, together. What are the odds?"

"Actually, it makes perfect sense. They organized it by neighborhood. Since we all live near each other . . ." Max says, gesturing to the three of them.

"Have you seen Joyce or Hopper or anybody?"

Lucas shakes his head, looking solemn.

"No, I haven't."

They fall silent for a moment, and then Lucas gestures to Dustin's bruised toes.

"What happened to you?"

Dustin sighs, hanging his head.

"I dropped a dumbbell on my foot."

Lucas bursts out laughing. Dustin's face contorts, and he shoves Lucas playfully.

"It's not funny!"

. . .

The evening drags on, and the four friends split to spend time with their families. The next afternoon, they find themselves in Dustin's hotel room once again. Dustin somehow managed to find a deck of cards, and they're challenging each other to a game of Crazy Eights when Mike is assaulted with a splitting headache. It comes on suddenly, and it feels like someone is inside his skull, beating his brain with a sledge hammer. He pinches the bridge of his nose, trying to relieve some of the pressure. Max looks at him concernedly, noticing his discomfort.

"You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." He assures her, trying to ignore the pain steadily growing in his temple.

Soon, he can't ignore it any longer. A wave of nausea overcomes him. Quickly, he excuses himself to the bathroom and locks the door, slumping over the sink. He stares into the porcelain. His vision dims, and his heartbeat too loud.

And he hears her scream.

33. The Beginning of the End

El moves toward Will, heart hammering. Her breath is lodged in her throat, like the gigantic lump that comes when you're about to cry. Seven stands behind her, hugging her around the waist, shaking from head to toe. She tries to push him away, into the corner where she knows he'll be safer. Six and Nine stand on either side of her, looking at Will fearfully.

He's slumped in the middle of the room, writhing, making awful noises. He claws at the ground, at the mattress, glazed eyes distant and unseeing. It's his worst attack yet.

El stares at him, eyes filling with tears, arms slightly outstretched. If she can muster up the strength, she can restrain him. For a little while. Enough to get Six and Seven and Nine to safety. But Will . . . she can't do anything for him.

She watches as his skin begins to tinge with gray and his limbs lengthen. He is his own breed of monster. Not the Demogorgon, because the Demogorgon is El's demon. No. This is something entirely his own.

He stands still for a moment, scenting the air, seemingly disoriented. Slowly, he turns to face them, lips pulled back in a manic snarl, long-fingered hands outstretched. He throws his head back and screams, a terrible cry. It pierces the air, high-pitched and rough, squealing like rusty hinges or fingernails against a chalkboard, a thousand times magnified. El clamps her hands over her ears, taking a step back.

"Will!" She yells, over the awful shrieks. "Will! Will, come back to us." She sobs, pushing it toward him mentally too, trying to force her way into his head. It doesn't work. She's met with an impossibly strong barrier, almost as if his mind is guarded by strong wall or a barbed wire fence. She's not strong enough to infiltrate it.

He stops howling for a moment, scenting the air.

"He's calling the Queen." Six gasps, face white. She lays a hand on El's shoulder. "We need to go, now." El opens her mouth to respond, and

Will lunges for her. A scream escapes her lips as she's thrown backwards, into the wall. Her back is pressed against the tiles, her fingernails scraping weakly over Monster-Will's gray skin. His claws dig into her shoulder, the stench and warmth of his breath licks her cheeks and neck. She coughs, neck bent awkwardly between his body and the wall.

"Will . . ." She gasps. "Will, it's me. It's El . . . Will!" She cries, hoarsely. His body bears down on her chest, squeezing all the oxygen from her lungs. She can't breath, can't see. And she's thinking *this is it. It's the end.*

With what meager strength she has left, she reaches into the depths of her consciousness, finding Mike's mental presence. She severs it, letting him go. The last bird, flying from its cage.

She gasps, feeling him ripped from her grasp. It's like an organ has been torn from her body, leaving her breathless and weak and dying. And she's cold. So cold.

Goodbye, Mike.

. . .

It's a blur of darkness and buzzing sound. He loses all awareness of his surroundings. The porcelain sink and the granite countertop dissolve. He's falling. . .

A scream. A terrible, shrieking howl.

And then she's gone.

He cries out as the mental link is torn away. Scattered thoughts and bits of memory fly in every direction, embedding in his consciousness like shards of glass. And there's a hole. A white hot, ragged space that fills him with terror and pain. A gaping wound, where she used to be and now she's gone and he can't breath. He can't function, can't move or think. He reaches out to her, trying to call her back, choking on his tears. He keeps expecting to feel her, like an amputee expects to find their limb still attached. Because that's what she is to him, a part of him. A piece. And now he's really lost her.

He jolts awake. The screams fade, but there's an impossibly loud ringing in his ears that won't go away. Her presence is still gone, and there's a void inside him where she should be. He sits up, vaguely aware of the fact that he's surrounded by shards of glass. He must of knocked into the mirror when he passed out . . .

His hands are bleeding, and some fragments are lodged in his hands and arms, adding a new set of scratches and scars to his skin. He still can't hear properly, and it's almost like he's under water and everything is muffled. He becomes aware of Dustin and Lucas, kneeling beside him, looking pale and worried. The knob is broken and hanging limply from the door, the hinges bent slightly. Mike watches their lips moving, vaguely wonders what they're saying. He shakes his head, trying to clear it, raising his injured hand to his face. He realizes his nose is bleeding, and attempts to wipe it away. But the stream is thick and the droplets fall onto the collar of his shirt and the glass-strewn floor.

"Mike . . . "

"Mike, dude, are you okay?"

"Mike, can you hear us?"

"Mike!"

His ears pop, and he can hear again. They talk over one another, anxious voices blending in a violent cacophony that assaults his eardrums. Mike is still disoriented, and he has trouble picking out one voice from the next. He shakes his head, attempting to stand.

"What happened?" Dustin asks, anxiously.

Mike looks at him, then Max and Lucas. He tries to swallow the lump in his throat.

"She's gone." Mike says, hoarsely, after a long time. Hours, maybe. An eternity and a split second

"What?" Dustin says, anxiously. His voice rises an octave. Max grabs his wrist and squeezes it tightly. Her knuckles are stark white.

"She's gone." He says, again, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Mike, what do you mean?"

"I can't feel her anymore." He says, dully. He looks disoriented, almost mad. There's a dangerous glint in his red-rimmed eyes. Without another word, he stands and pushes past them, stepping out into the hall. They exchange worried glances and follow him. Mike breaks into a run, Lucas following close behind.

"Mike, wait." He calls. "Mike! Don't do this, man. Where are you going?"

No answer. Not even a backward glance. Lucas grabs his arm, forcing him to stop.

"Mike!" He hisses, through gritted teeth.

"Let go of me." Mike says, voice low and even. Lucas shakes his head.

"No. Not until you tell me what you're doing."

"I have to find her." Mike mumbles, dumbly. His face contorts into an agonized grimace. "I HAVE TO FIND HER! LET ME GO!" He screams, wrenching his arm away.

"Mike, listen to me. Listen to me." Max says, looking upset. "Let us help you. We care about her as much as you do, but this is stupid. You're going to get hurt."

"You don't."

"What?"

"You don't care about her! Not the way I do. You have no idea! No idea . . ." His voice breaks. He looks helplessly at her, then Lucas and Dustin. He opens his mouth and closes it again, searching for words, and bursts into tears.

. . .

It takes a long time to calm him down. Longer still, to get anything

resembling words out of him. When he's cried himself out, he stares blankly at the far wall, eyes unseeing, quiet and relatively unresponsive. Max, Dustin, and Lucas are patient with him, all of them close to tears themselves.

Finally, Max breaks the silence.

"We need a plan."

Lucas and Dustin look at her, raising their eyebrows.

"A plan?"

"We're not going to sit here and do nothing. We need to find her."

"We can't get out of here. It's like a prison, there's guards everywhere. What, you think we're just going to skip out the front door and not get caught?" Lucas says, rolling his eyes.

"Cuz it's not gonna happen."

"No . . . I don't know . . ." Max says, shaking her head.

"There's gotta be a back door, some other entrance." Dustin says.

"There's government guys everywhere!"

"Wait, why are we even going back to Hawkins? It's too dangerous." Lucas says, anxiously. "How do we know it's not gonna be the same scenario? The Gate's still closed."

"We don't know that."

Dustin glances around at all of them. Mike continues to stare straight ahead, blankly. He's silent, his eyes unfocused. Dustin's brow furrows.

"There's only one way to find out."

. . .

"Excuse me, sir? Do you happen to have a compass?"

The four of them are running around, asking every person they come

across. They knock on doors, desperately searching for anything resembling a compass. Mike has managed to pull himself together, at least a little bit. He accompanies Lucas as they race around the dining hall, interrupting their neighbors' conversations. With each passing minute, they grow more disgruntled, frustrated.

"There's not a single, goddamn compass in this place?" Lucas groans. Mike swallows, glancing around helplessly.

"Isn't it possible to make one?"

"We need a magnet. And I doubt anyone has a fricking magnet either."

"Well . . ." Mike says, trailing off.

"Mike!"

Dustin barrels toward them, followed closely by Max. His fist is raised in the air.

"Mike! Lucas! I got one!"

"Really?"

"Yeah." He brandishes it at them.

"Who had it?"

"Grouchy old Mr. Lewis."

"That crazy bastard fought in Vietnam with my dad." Lucas says. He sets it down on the table. Mike holds his breath. The needle tilts. Dustin's eyes narrow. He stares at it, then looks at the ceiling, muttering to himself. He traces the ceiling with his finger, tracking an imaginary sun.

He looks at them all, eyes wide.

"It's not true North."

Mike blows out a breath, looking at them all. Max's mouth twitches

into a half smile.

"Let's go get our friends back."

. . .

There's a back entrance on the first floor, in a narrow hallway beside the dining hall. It's marked with a green exit sign, and protected by a uniformed soldier. A pistol rests on his hip, beside a walkie talkie and a pouch for ammunition. Mike stands beside Lucas, chewing on his tongue, tapping his foot impatiently. His fingers twist into the hem of his t-shirt. He can't seem to keep himself still. He's buzzing with new adrenaline and excitement.

Lucas glances around the corner, looking at the soldier.

"His name is Costello. It's stitched into his uniform." Lucas says, quietly. Mike nods.

"Let's go tell them. It's time to initiate Phase One."

Lucas snorts, rolling his eyes.

They walk down the hall, meeting Dustin and Max around the corner.

"Okay. His name is Costello. If we can get our hands on a walkie talkie, we can call him away from the door." Lucas explains.

"How're we gonna do that?" Dustin sputters. "These guys have guns. Very very very scary looking guns."

"I don't know. Just figure something out, alright?" Lucas says. "We'll meet you at the corner by the door in ten minutes, give or take. If you're not there in twenty, we'll come looking for you, assuming something went wrong. Sound good?"

Dustin nods, slowly.

"Max, you got our stuff?"

Max nods, sweeping a lock of fiery red hair over her shoulder. She holds up Mike's pack, now bulging with water bottles, Mr. Lewis'

compass, and enough snacks to satisfy Dustin and a pride of hungry lions.

"I got it all."

"Okay." Lucas says, sarcastically. "See you in ten."

Mike follows Lucas back to the corner by the door. Their new friend, Costello, is still there, looking quite bored. The man is short and stocky, with an stubbly face and graying hair. He's currently cleaning his fingernails with a pocket knife.

Mike breathes a sigh of relief. They stay by the wall, out of sight of the soldier. The hallway is otherwise deserted.

Mike stares at his watch, counting the seconds.

After a small eternity, they hear the man's walkie talkie crackle to life.

Dustin's disembodied voice floats through the device, a bit deeper than usual. He's using a broken sort of British accent. Mike fights the urge to laugh.

Costello replies, but Mike doesn't quite catch it. They can hear the man's footsteps, and Mike and Lucas just have time to turn around and walk down the hall, feigning disinterest, before the soldier rounds the corner and passes him.

"Success." Lucas whispers, after Costello disappears through a set of double doors.

"Not yet." Mike warns. He fights the nervous squirm in his stomach.

After a few more minutes, Dustin and Max appear around the corner, laughing

"The accent?" Lucas says, chuckling.

"Yeah, I honestly don't know where that came from." Dustin says, looking sheepish. Max giggles.

"Doesn't matter. He bought it." Mike says, grinning. "We should hurry, though."

He leads the way to the now-unguarded door and turns the knob. The door opens with ease, miraculously unlocked.

Mike takes a breath and crosses the threshold, stepping into the bright sunshine. He blinks, trying to adjust his eyes to the brilliance of the day.

Dustin sucks in a huge breath.

"It's good to be free." He says, sighing loudly. He starting running, arms waving around, whistling a little tune. He's still limping from the Dumbbell Incident, but only slightly.

Max rolls her eyes.

"That kid, I swear . . ." She says fondly, shaking her head. There's warmth in her eyes.

Mike glances around. They're standing on the side of the building, in a wide alleyway. The street is empty. There are a few cars parked along the walk

"Now what? How are we going to get there?" Lucas asks.

"I don't know. Let me think." Mike says. His eyes sweep the street.

"We need to hot-wire one of these cars or something, like they do in the movies." Dustin says. He's panting and red in the face.

"That's so obviously not gonna happen." Lucas says, flicking him.

"Ow." He complains, softly.

Max walks toward an old, dusty pickup truck. She peers in the window.

"Holy shit and shinola!" She yells, waving them over. "Guys, there's keys in the ignition." She calls, opening the door. It's unlocked.

"Really?" Dustin yelps. They walk toward the truck. Dustin clambers into the front seat and turns the engine over a few times. It hums to life like some monster emerging from several years of sleep.

"Yes!" Dustin cries, pumping his fist. Mike grins, not sure he even believes their luck. He starts to climb into the back seat when a hand grabs his wrist. He turns, and finds himself face to face with Nancy.

"Nancy?" He cries, alarmed. "Uhh, what're you, uh, doing here?" His voice is unusually high.

"The real question is, what are you doing here?" She returns, coolly, narrowing her eyes.

He opens, his mouth, closes it again, and gives in. He tells her about the Gate and their plan to return to Hawkins.

She bites her lip, shaking her head.

"Mike, I can't let you do that."

Mike draws himself to his full, impressive height, and glares at her. His fingernails bite at the skin of his palm.

"And I can't let you stop us."

Nancy shifts, looking helpless. Her gaze flits between the four of them.

"Then I'm coming with you."

. . .

Mike watches the world blur into itself outside the window. They're speeding down the highway, going at least seventy. The midday sun falls in bright squares across their laps. The roads are mostly deserted. Nancy is shoved between Mike and Lucas. She leans back, watching the window. Mike fidgets, absentmindedly knotting his fingers together, building pyramids and prison cells with his hands. Max wrestles with the radio, trying to find a station that isn't hopelessly clogged with static.

No such luck.

The air itself seems to be alive with static, humming and vibrating, like some

unspoken resolve that floats between them. A silent acknowledgement of the storm that lies ahead of them.

Mike lets his mind wander. Again, he tries to reach for El, and again, he finds only a jagged hole. His breath snags in his throat, like a kite caught in a tree. He knows she's gone. Still, he searches for her. It's blind, senseless hope. It's all he has left.

He thinks of Hawkins. What has it become? Infested with monsters? Or the same, quiet town he knows?

His mind finds its way back to El. Always.

He lost the connection. And still, some part of him knows she's still alive. He refuses to think otherwise. Anything else is unbearable. Mike thinks of the Upside Down, the hole in the wall, plastered with alien plant matter. A monstrous, living, breathing entity. He shivers at the thought.

He knows it won't be easy. But he'll fight tooth and nail. He'll fight until

he gets her back, or dies trying.

Mike glances around at the others, suddenly afraid. Afraid for them. The fear is so real and blinding that a sudden wave of dizziness overcomes him.

He can't lose them.

He swallows, hard. He knows he can't talk them out of it. They've made that painfully clear.

We care about her as much as you do

We're in this together

Let us help you

Their voices bounce around inside his skull. And he's seeing blood. Blood on the leaves, leaking from Lucas' arm; blood glistening on the knife in Max's hand after she killed a monster and saved his life. Everything they've done for him, everything they've sacrificed. He can't watch them die. He can't let them get hurt. And he's so *scared*.

He slumps against the seat, pushing the thoughts from his mind. He returns his attention to the road, gazing at the budding trees and the wispy clouds embedded in a brilliant, sapphire sky.

At least they're going home.

It's bittersweet, really.

At least they're going home.

34. Flight From 7-11 and a Hero's Escape

"I'm hungry." Dustin says, loudly.

"You just ate that entire bag of barbeque chips." Lucas says. Dustin glances at the empty package resting in his lap.

"Yeah, but I'm still hungry." He complains, massaging his stomach. "Can we pull over and eat something?"

"Dude, Will and El could be in serious trouble right now. You really think it's a good idea to stop just so you can eat a hamburger?"

"Lucas, it's okay. We need gas anyway." Mike says, leaning over to peer at the dashboard. The dial is leaning dangerously toward 'Empty'.

"There's a 7-Eleven two miles up if you take the next exit." Max says, pouring over a paper map they found crumpled up in the glove compartment.

Dustin pulls into the 7-Eleven, leaping out of the car. Max, Nancy, and Lucas follow him into the store while Mike remains outside, getting gas with Lucas' debit card. He taps his toe impatiently, leaning against the door of the Ford pickup.

The paint is peeling, the metal frame starting to rust. There's a cigarette burn in the fabric of the front seat. The passenger side window has a large crack in the corner. The whole thing smells like stale tobacco and sawdust. His father would've called it "well loved".

Mike takes his eyes off the car and watches the gallon count as it goes up, slowly but surely.

The place is nearly deserted. One man stands outside the 7-Eleven entrance, smoking a cigar. Mike watches as he stamps it out, spits on the ground, then climbs into his Chevy and drives away. Along the highway, a large military truck speeds past.

The gas pump clicks, jerking Mike from his stupor. He rouses himself to action, taking the pump from the car and returning it to the

machine. He's about to climb back into the car when a sudden shiver runs through him. In a fraction of a second, every hair on his body stands on end. He glances around apprehensively, trying to figure out what's psyching him out.

A funny shuffling noise reaches his ears. Mike edges forward, clamping his hand over his mouth to muffle his breathing. He peers around the edge of the Ford's tailgate, and opens his mouth to scream.

. . .

Hopper holds his breath, side pressed against the wall behind the door, listening to the lock as it clicks. He can hear the shuffling feet of the nurse outside his door, on her way to bring his breakfast. The door opens, and he springs forward, pushing her up against the wall. The food tray clatters to the floor, sending overripe fruit and burnt toast flying in every direction. The nurse utters a small scream before he clamps his hand over her mouth, tapping his finger to his lips. She looks at him, fearfully, falling silent.

"Keep quiet, or I *will* kill you." He growls, glaring at her. She shrinks back, nodding frantically. He lets go, turning on his heel, bursting through the door. Luckily, there's nobody in the hallway. His heart is hammering in his chest. He skids to a halt, peering around the corner. A few yards to the left, an suspecting soldier is standing guard. He steels himself, and rushes at the man. Hopper catches the soldier unprepared. He drives his fist into the man's face. He yelps, clamping his hands over his nose. Blood runs between his fingers. Hopper draws back his hand and punches the soldier again. His knees hit the floor faster than Hopper can take a breath. Hastily, Hopper takes his gun and ammunition. Stuffing the boxes of ammo into his pockets, he rushes down the hallway and bursts through the double doors. A pair of soldiers whip around, brows furrowing. They start to yell, reaching for their radios. Hopper puts a bullet in the leg of each soldier, rushing forward to take their radios.

Hopper's heart leaps into his throat. Sweat pours down his face, making the hospital-loaned clothes he's wearing cling to him uncomfortably. He reloads the soldier's handgun and sprints down the hallway, which ends in another door. He makes it down a narrow

staircase without running into any more soldiers or hospital staff. After a few minutes of frantic searching, he finds an unguarded, windowed exit door. Hopper jiggles the doorknob. Locked. He rams the grip of the gun into the glass, and it shatters easily. Blood immediately runs from his hand, leaking from the cuts made by the glass fragments. Alarms begin to sound, and lights flash in the hallway.

As carefully as possible, Hopper climbs through the broken glass and takes off running, towards a wide parking lot around the back of the hospital. The only sound is the shrill alarms sounding inside the hospital. A car rumbles down the street. Hopper rushes toward it, waving. The car stops. He opens the door, holding the gun in front of him. The driver, an old man, whimpers, holding up his hands.

"Hawkins Chief of Police. Sir, step outside the vehicle." Hopper says, brandishing the gun. The man nods and gets out, trembling slightly. Hopper climbs into the front seat and tosses the gun onto the passenger seat. He slams on the gas, rocketing down the street. Gunshots erupt behind him, and the rear window shatters as a bullet strikes it. The government officials are shooting at him. Hopper speeds up, glancing in his mirror just in time to witness the old man crumpling to the ground, struck by a stray bullet. Innocent and caught in the crossfire. Hopper squeezes his eyes shut, dread settling heavy in the pit of his stomach.

He tears through the streets, ignoring red lights. He turns onto the highway and takes a deep breath, hands tightening around the steering wheel. He doesn't really have a plan. He only knows he needs to get back to Hawkins.

He's going home.

...

The monster is on top of him before he can draw a breath. He's lying flat on his back, sprawled on the asphalt. The monster is large and reptilian, much like the one that mauled Lucas' shoulder. It works its jaws, muscles coiling under slimy gray skin. Its eyes are a glaring yellow, its snout short, nostrils flaring. Thin strings of saliva hang in silver ropes from its gums. The monster's tongue grazes Mike's cheek.

"Aaaaarrghhhh!" He cries out, trying to roll to the side. The lizardlike creature lunges, jaws clamping around the fabric of his shirt. Mike inhales sharply, wrenching himself away from the creature. His shirt rips, leaving the monster with a mouthful of fabric. Mike leaps to his feet, panting, fear coursing through him.

The bell clangs, and the monster whips around, thick neck turning toward the sound. Mike's heart sinks to the ground. Dustin, Nancy, Max, and Lucas freeze in their tracks, standing still and silent in the doorway of the run-down 7-Eleven. Their eyes grow wide, their faces pale. Dustin drops his package of Twizzlers.

The monster lurches after them, stocky legs pumping, tail swishing back and forth.

"Run!" Mike calls, his heartbeat a deafening roar in his ears. Dustin steps in front of Max and Nancy, shielding them with his body, turning around to face the monster himself. The monster pauses, sizing up the challenger. It screams and clicks its teeth together.

"Dustin, no!" Mike yells, running toward the monster. Pure adrenaline rushes through his body, occupying his veins and his brain and his throbbing heart. He's driven with that same, blinding, overwhelming fear. Fear for their lives. He won't lose them. He won't watch them die.

He collides with the monster full-force, ramming his shoulder into its rib cage. Pain explodes in his shoulder and collarbone, knocking him senseless. Stars explode behind his eyes. He lands on his ass in the gutter, leg bent awkwardly underneath him, his palms scraping against the cement. Fresh blood immediately runs from the skin of his palms, adding a new set of wounds to the ones left by the broken mirror.

"Mike!" Dustin yells.

The monster reels, attention divided between the two of them. Max rushes forward, dragging Dustin out of the way. Mike jumps to his feet, wincing as his ankle throbs painfully.

A soda can flies through the air, hitting the monster on the shoulder.

It rounds on him, snarling.

Lucas yells something, but Mike can't hear him over the monster's snorts and shrieks. Lucas clutches another soda can. He draws his arm back, hurling it towards the beast. This time, it hits the creature's snout. It howls in pain, leaping toward him.

"Lucas!"

The monster knocks Lucas backward. He collides with the front doors of the 7-Eleven. The glass breaks, flying in every direction. Nancy screams, running forward. The cashier, a man in his late twenties, yells, ducking behind the counter. Mike jumps over the glass, searching for anything that could be used as a weapon. He grabs a small Swiss Army pocket knife from a shelf and fumbles with the packaging. The monster roars, lunging for him. Mike wrestles with the plastic and removes the knife, thrusting it toward the monster.

It's ridiculous, though. A *pocket knife* against the equivalent of an alter-dimensional velociraptor. It hisses, drawing back its lips to reveal rows of pearly-white teeth. Its claws lash out, knocking the knife from his hands. It lunges for him and slips on the glass-strewn, slick tiled floor. The beast falls, snarling, claws scraping against the floor. Lucas scrambles to his feet and rushes forward, grabbing Mike's wrist.

"Run!" Lucas gasps, pushing him forward. He can hear the monster's wild hissing, the scraping and crashing as it knocks over a rack of magazines. Mike doesn't need to be told twice. He breaks into a run. Nancy is beside him, panting, screaming in his ear.

The monster roars. Glass crunches under its weight. The awful snarling assaults his eardrums, setting his body vibrating with intermingling fear and adrenaline. He can hear it, close behind them, it's labored breathing loud in his ears.

Dustin and Max are ahead of him.

"Go! Get to the truck!" He yells, waving them forward. Mike reaches the Ford, climbing into the driver's seat. Max clambers into the passenger seat, and Dustin, Nancy, and Lucas throw themselves in the

back, slamming the doors.

"Go go go go go." Dustin urges, banging on his headrest. He's panting and red in the face, staring fearfully out the window. Mike turns the key and slams on the gas. The truck lurches forward. Outside, the monster lunges for the truck. The passenger side window shatters, and glass rains down on them. Max screams, her arms reaching up to cover her face. The monster's head is jammed in the window, the flesh on its throat bloodied by the broken glass. It snaps at Max, trying to reach her through the window. She leans out of the way, trembling violently. Its tongue slips past its lips, swiping across the skin on her neck. She shudders.

"Mike, now would be a good time to drive away . . ." Lucas screams.

"I'm trying!" He yells, fumbling with the wheel. His hands are shaking so badly . . .

He floors it, and the old truck rolls forward, steadily picking up speed. Mike spins the wheel furiously, making a sharp turn out of the lot. The monster screams, withdrawing its head from the window. It dismounts the truck.

Mike doesn't slow down until he's put a fair distance between them and the monster. In the rear-view mirror, he can just make out the silhouette of the lizard as it crumples to the ground in a heap. It convulses for a moment, then transforms into an unmistakably humanoid form. Mike shudders.

He turns onto the highway, then glances back at his friends.

"Everyone alright?" He says, worriedly.

"Uh, I may have a . . . slight problem." Max says, turning towards them. Mike glances sideways at her and he slams on the breaks, his stomach tying itself in knots.

A large piece of glass, about two inches wide, is embedded in the right side of her forehead. Blood trickles from the wound, running into her eyes. Mike inhales, fighting the urge to look away. He's immediately queasy. Dustin gasps.

"Oh my god oh my god oh my god."

Mike pulls over on the side of the road, then turns to Max, trying to offer some words of comfort. His voice is high and breathy and anxious.

Max sits back in the seat, breathing deeply through her nose. Her hand is clamped around the arm rest, her knuckles bloodless and shocking white. She's close to passing out.

"Mike, I think you need to pull it out. I can't see it well enough . . ."

Her voice is faint, barely a whisper.

Mike nods, licking his lips nervously. She's right.

She turns toward him. The skin is starting to swell, pulled tight around the rough edges of the glass.

"Okay. Uh . . . I'll count to three." Mike says, taking a breath. Max's eyes are trained on him, her cracked lips pressed together. Her body is rigid. Mike's hand hovers above the glass.

"One." Max closes her eyes.

"Two." Mike's heart drums against his ribs. He can't keep his hands steady . . .

"Three." He grips it with his fingertips and pulls. It makes a sickening *squelch* and slides easily from her skin. She cries out, cupping her hand over the gash. A fresh stream of blood pools in her eye and flows down her cheek, staining the front of her shirt.

Mike stares at the bloodied piece of glass, glistening in his palm.

"Eeeeeewwww. That's probably the grossest thing I've seen in my entire life. Besides, you know, Mike and El's painfully awkward make-out sessions." Lucas says, smirking.

"Hey!" Mike cries, indignantly. Dustin snickers.

"Uh, I hate to interrupt, but I'm kinda bleeding all over the place." Max says, clearing her throat.

Dustin tears the sleeve from his shirt. Mike takes it from him and presses it against her forehead. The cloth is soaked through in seconds. Dustin hands them another strip, which Mike plasters over the cut. After a few minutes, the flow of blood lessens considerably.

Mike makes her switch seats with Lucas so Dustin can keep an eye on her. She leans against him, and he holds the cloth to her forehead. Some color has returned to her cheeks.

"Alright there, Maxi-Taxi?" Dustin says, nervously.

"Yeah." She breathes. Dustin sighs, obviously relieved. Lucas gives a weak laugh.

"Good, 'cause there's more where that came from." Dustin says. Lucas' nervous chuckling breaks off. Mike stares at them all, stomach clenching.

"Guys, you don't have to do this, you-"

"Mike, shut your face hole." Max snaps, glaring at him. "We're coming with you."

"But . . ."

"Dude, you can argue all you want. We're coming. You can't stop us." Lucas says.

"We're in this together, remember?" Dustin says, quietly. Mike looks at the four of them, helpless. He opens his mouth, searching for words. A familiar, overwhelming wave of gratitude and appreciation wells up inside his chest.

Without another word, Mike pulls the old ford onto the highway once again. He glances in the rearview mirror, then leans back, pinching the bridge of his nose.

They're in this together.

35. The Lost Brother

El sprints down the hall, trying to ignore the dull ache in her lungs and the sound of her own heartbeat in her head. Will, *no, scratch that* . . . the monster is gaining on her. It's breath pushes against the back of her neck. The noises that escape from its mouth reverberate through the narrow hallway. El stumbles, and her knees hit the floor. Hard. She skids across the tiles, elbow hitting the wall with a dull *thud*. She lands in a heap on the floor, her legs trapped beneath her body. Her vision is dim, and she can hear the monster's triumphant cry as it lunges for her, mouth agape, claws outstretched, ready to end it all . . .

It should've ended there. It should've ended a long time ago, in a middle school science classroom on the night of November 12, 1983.

Somebody catches hold of her wrist, pulling her up. She can't see, can't breathe . . .

And Six is yelling in her ear, telling her to run. Run. Faster. Faster . . .

And she does, despite the exhaustion, the pain. She runs, not stopping, not slowing down for a second. Nine and Seven are ahead of her. They push open a set of doors, taking the staircase. Another maze of corridors leads them to the broken window. El climbs through it, ignoring the glass as it tears into her hands and legs like jagged teeth.

Outside, the others pause, looking wildly around. El stops when she reaches them and nearly collapses. Big, black spots swim before her eyes.

Monster-Will leaps through the broken window, nimbly, lips pulled back in a snarl, spittle flying as it turns to face them. It throws back its head and screams, a ghastly sound that pierces the silence like a needle punctures a balloon. Like a demon singing in the dark. It makes her teeth ache.

El clamps her hands over her ears, willing it stop, wishing it would end . . .

"Will!" She screams, again, above the noise.

Will . . .

Across the clearing, trees begin to sway, disturbed by a nonexistent wind. It's hard to make out anything in the dim light. She squints, eyes flicking between the monster and the cluster of undulating trees. Shadows seem to waltz out of the darkness, pressing over her mouth and nose and eyes. They swim to the surface of her consciousness, singing with a thousand voices. A pocketful of demons. A monster called Papa, and a friend called Will.

And a newcomer.

A pair of gleaming yellow eyes.

. . .

The sun is beginning its descent. The sky is tinged a faint yellow, and the air is cool. Mike rolls down the window, letting the fresh air brush across his face, but it does nothing to ease his nerves.

They are approximately two miles away from Hawkins when they begin to hear the helicopters buzzing overhead, like a bunch of strange metal insects. The highway is surrounded by woods. The road, itself, is in bad shape. Every jostle and bump adds to Mike's unease. He glances in the rear-view mirror, making sure Max is okay. He has to reassure himself several times over. *It's just a cut . . . it could be worse. Way, way worse.*

Mike grips the steering wheel tightly, jaws clenched, trying to keep his composure.

As they pass the city limit, they start to hear the gunfire. Lucas and Dustin exchange apprehensive glances.

Just past the city limit, a couple of soldiers stand in the middle of the road, guns in hand, blocking their way. Mike brakes. The old ford lurches, groaning slightly, as it approaches the group of uniformed men. He's cursing himself for not expecting something like this. They have the whole city surrounded, secluded . . .

"Uhhh, guys?" He says, panic evident in his voice.

"Shit." Lucas says, through gritted teeth.

"What do we do? They're never gonna let us get past . . ."

"Mike . . ."

Before Mike has time to stop the car, a dark shape darts onto the highway. Nancy screams, pointing at the window. The soldiers open fire, and the sound reverberates in Mike's skull, jarring his teeth. He can just make out the form of some unfamiliar creature, another monster, as it attacks the men.

Mike seizes his chance. He slams his foot on the gas pedal, turning the wheel sharply to the left. The tires roll onto the grassy roadside. Mike has the wheel in a death grip.

He drives a wide circle around the soldiers. When the tires find asphalt, he floors it, not daring to look back for a second. He can still hear the gunfire, dangerously near, the distant cries of the monster. Mike's heart slams against his chest. He's cold inside his clothes.

Eventually, his heartbeat slows. He drives past the shopping center with the comic book store and the Radio Shack and Melvald's General Store, then through several familiar neighborhoods.

Military trucks and police cars rush past them every few minutes. Red and blue lights light up the buildings and storefronts that line the streets in the center of town. Mike glances toward the sky, noting the gray clouds swollen with rain.

The empty houses are unlit and dismal, the front yards overgrown and unkept. Tangles of branches and roots and bushes spill over the sides of the once neatly tended yards. Streetlamps and porch lights flicker occasionally.

Hawkins is a skeleton. Once, it was home. Mike shivers.

As Mike drives through the gloomy neighborhoods, he's unfortunate enough to catch glimpses of the remaining occupants.

The monsters flicker in the corners of his eyes. Some are faceless. Some reptilian, some several-limbed and multiple-headed. Eyes glint in the darkness, and shadows dance through the deserted streets.

"We need weapons." Lucas says.

"We don't have time."

"Yes, we do." He says, firmly. "I don't know about you, but I'm sure as hell not fighting a monster with my bare hands. Sorry, no thank you, not a chance, definitely not happening." He snaps, folding his arms.

"He's right." Dustin says. His voice is small, somehow, like a child's. Nancy nods.

"We can go to the Byers. Joyce has a gun . . . a revolver, I think. She bought it after Will came back, and I think the bat is there, too. The one with the nails . . ."

Mike looks between them, clearly outnumbered. He blows out a breath, mumbling an agreement.

Mike drives as fast as the old Ford will allow him. He pulls into the Byers' drive and parks the car. All five of them climb the porch steps. Nancy stoops down and retrieves a spare key from under a little frog sculpture by the door. Mike raises his eyebrows, and she shrugs, cheeks flushing. She hands him the key and he unlocks the door.

The house is dark. Dust has settled on every surface, and cobwebs are draped in corners like ghostly curtains. The curtain is drawn, but the small slit lets a piece of silvery light into the room. It falls across the floor. The five of them gather in the musty hallway, silent and uneasy, staring into the shadows of the living room. A room that was once so warm and welcoming and familiar . . .

"The pistol is in Joyce's room. The bat is in the shed. There's probably other stuff we can use in there, too."

"I'll go get it." Dustin assures her. Max follows him out the door.

Nancy leads Mike and Lucas down the hall. She pauses outside Joyce's bedroom, draws a deep breath, and pushes the door open.

Her bedroom is as dark and eerie as the rest of the house. Nancy, brow creased with hard determination, kneels beside the bed and draws out a shoebox. She removes a small pistol and a few boxes of ammunition,

"How d'you . . . "

"It's a long story." Nancy says. She straightens up, turning the pistol over in her hands. Her eyes are clouded with a distant memory. She gives her head a little shake. "C'mon. We should go."

Outside, Max and Dustin's arms are laden with various sharp, metal objects. Several rusted shovels lie on the ground at their feet, beside a crow bar and the baseball bat with nails driven through it. Max holds a kitchen knife.

Lucas takes the bat in his hands and swings it, nodding his approval. His face breaks into a wide, manic grin.

"Let's kick some monster ass."

. . .

The Queen's sheer size triumphs anything that exists in the Rightside Up. She's roughly the size of a two-story house, with multiple, long limbs and a short, eerily human-like face. Her eyes are like a bird's: yellow and round and large, full of intelligence. Her skin is grey-green and scaly. She's looks like the offspring of a giant spider and Godzilla.

El's heart leaps into her throat. Static swims behind her eyes and clouds her brain. She can still hear Monster-Will's mournful cry, echoing inside her skull. Six is tugging on her sleeve, yelling something, but the sound is distant and fuzzy.

"Will." She says, dumbly, her brain still struggling to comprehend the monstrous entity standing a mere fifty or sixty yard from them.

The Queen lifts her head and scents the air, nostrils flaring, tilting her head from side to side in oddly robotic movements that are almost avian. Her tongue swipes over her snarling lips. She opens her maw, revealing rows of uneven, razor-sharp teeth.

The Queen throws back her head and screams. The sound is ten times worse than Will's mournful cry. A terrible pain grows in El's head. She raises her hand, pressing her palm on the spot above her right eye, the place where she gets headaches. A wave of dizziness sweeps over her, making her breathless and nauseous. El feels a sudden warmth above her lip and raises her other hand to her nose. Her fingers come away slick with blood.

Time slows to a sluggish crawl. El watches, head pounding, heart beating much too fast, as the Queen lunges toward them.

...

The monsters surround the entrance of the lab like bees near a hive. There are too many to count. They flicker in and out of sight, dressed half in shadow, half in light.

Every hair on his body stands on end, every muscle rigid. He can feel his pulse drumming in his fingertips, in his ears. The monsters' shrieks blend with the cries of his friends in a strange chorus. He doesn't have time to pray for their safety, can only muster up the strength to raise the spiked baseball bat when the first attack comes.

The attacks come in waves, one after another, unrelenting.

Mike's hand is curled tightly around the bat, the skin of his fingers glued to the wooden handle with drying blood. There's blood under his fingernails and blood pouring into his eyes from a deep cut that traces straight across his forehead. His shoulder is pressed against Dustin's back. They defend each other's weak side, barely breathing, not stopping for a second.

Mike is barely aware of his surroundings, letting the adrenaline guide his hands, sinking the rusted nails of the bat into as many monsters as he can reach. Blood flies in every direction. The weapon infuriates them, and they begin to target him. Mike aims for the eyes and throats and skulls. The corpses begin to pile up around his feet.

A film of red reaches across his vision, and he can't tell if it's the blood in his eyes or the fear in his heart. He swings again and again, hearing the fractured rhythm of nails sinking into flesh, the

reassuring cry of pain that follows.

Vaguely, Mike is aware that he's screaming and can't seem to make himself stop.

The chainlink entrance to the lab lies a mere few feet away, and he edges toward it, his whole consciousness consumed with the oncoming attacks, the whirlwind of snarling teeth and outstretched claws.

A piercing shriek alerts him to a new opponent. A fairly large creature, like a cross between a rhinoceros and an insect. Its tail lashes from side to side, and it hisses, its mandibles clicking and whirring. Mike swings the bat toward it, and the nails sink into the side of its head. Long, scarlet gashes appear across the creature's face. It gives a pained cry, scrambling backward. The monster sways on the spot, shaking its head from side to side, clearly disoriented.

Mike doesn't hesitate. He hits it again, this time opening several deep cuts across its throat. The monster makes a terrible gurgling noise, its snout wet with blood.

Mike raises the bat, prepared to make the final blow, when a shadow darts out of the bushes. He doesn't have time to react, and the shadow throws its weight against him. He yells, caught by surprise, and loses his balance. He falls backward. A sharp pain explodes behind his eyes. Color seems to bleed out of the world, and Mike finds himself swimming in blurred hues of gray.

The world fades.

...

She's running again. Six clings to her, urging her on. She could be twelve again, holding Mike's hand, running through the hallways of the high school while bad men with big machine guns opened fire on the Demogorgon. The Queen crashes through the underbrush, squeezing herself between the trees, shrieking angrily. El has lost sight of Will. Nine and Seven are following close behind them. She can just discern their panicked breaths above the Queen's horrible shrieking. The Queen's stench hangs heavy in her nostrils, making her

head spin. Her terrifying, guttural cries bounce around El's skull, making it hard to think. And the terror is overwhelming.

El can barely focus on the ground in front of her. She runs, almost blindly, forcing herself to make her feet move. Six's hand guides her through the trees. They're running towards Mirkwood. Towards home.

Home.

A child's scream rips through the air. El stops, turning back toward the monster. The Queen pins Seven to the ground, her claws caught in the fabric of his clothes. He twists and kicks, trying to free himself. El doesn't think.

She throws out her good arm, mind convulsing like a powerful muscle. The bones in the creature's fingers shatter. She howls in pain, releasing Seven. He scrambles away. Nine pushes him forward.

"Run!" She screams. "Run!"

The adrenaline seems to leave her all at once. The pounding in her head increases. She doesn't bother wiping the blood away. The Queen turns to face her, snarling. The monster lunges, swiping one long limb toward El.

El collides with the thick trunk of an old pine. Pain explodes in her back and neck and shoulders. She gasps, all the oxygen leaving her lungs. The Queen's face is level with hers. She draws back her lips, pearly white teeth gleaming in the darkness. El attempts to muster up what little strength she has left, but she's so tired, so weak . . .

Something strikes the monster in the side of the head. She growls, rounding towards the direction of the thrown object. El slumps against the tree, panting, not for a second believing her luck.

Will stands in the gap between two trees, pale and disheveled but, at least, human, holding a rock in his bloodied palm. He throws it, hitting her square between the eyes.

She lunges toward him, furious.

"Will, no!" El screams, horrified, watching it play out like a sped-up film. Will's eyes widen. He lifts his arms in a last, feeble attempt to protect himself. El watches, helpless, as the Queen jaws lock around his upper body. Her teeth sink into the soft flesh under his chin, where the main arteries lie just beneath the skin. She can feel a scream building in her throat, watching the blood begin to pour from the wounds his neck and chest, staining his sweatshirt crimson. There's scarlet on his teeth and lips. Blood dribbles from the corner of his mouth.

El watches the light leave his eyes.

Everything leaves her, then. The exhaustion, the terror. She's numb.

She doesn't feel a thing when she kills it, the beast. The monster. The mother of the darkness, here.

The tree branch is thick and sturdy. It splinters off in a collection of sharp points. El's senses blur together in one powerful surge of mental force. She sends it straight through the monster's chest. It's snarling cries are cut off in jagged edges. It sways on the spot and tips forward. She can hear the wetness in its chest, the gurgling that marks the few moments before death.

She's aware of someone screaming. Tears stain her cheeks, and she's not even sure she's breathing.

Nothing feels real.

She sinks to her knees, clawing her way towards Will's body, fingernails scraping across the bark and thorns and dying plants. Her tears fall thick and fast now, and still, she's not willing to believe it.

It's not real.

It's not real it's not real it's not real it's not real . . .

"Will?" Her voice is ragged and unfamiliar.

"Will?"

"Will!" She screaming, now, reaching for him physically and

mentally. Of course, there's no response.

She takes his head in her lap, pushing back the hair on his forehead. Blood, too much blood, leaks from the gaping wounds in his throat and chest. It spreads out around him, black and glossy. If there were stars in the Upside Down, they would reflect on the surface.

El's breath comes in quick, panicked gasps. She presses her hands over the wounds, trying to staunch the flow. It's a futile task. It squeezes through her fingers, running down the curve of her thumb.

"No." She moans, sniffing. "No." She presses her hands against his paper-white cheeks, giving his head a little shake. His eyes remain open and unblinking, his body limp.

"No!" She screams, clamping a bloodied hand over her mouth. Her tears morph into terrible, full-body sobs. Her shoulders shake violently. She slumps over his chest, grabbing fistfuls of his shredded sweatshirt.

"Will . . ."

Her heart feels like it's going to explode, or stop altogether. A horrible ache weighs down on her chest, squeezing her ribcage, her lungs.

She can't breathe.

She doesn't know if she wants to.

She can feel hands on her shoulders, pulling her away. She flinches away from the unwelcome touch.

"El." A voice says, quietly. "There's nothing you can do for him."

"No." She moans, again, her voice shattering. She chokes on her tears.

"El, it's time to go home."

"Home?" She asks, voice small and wavering, like a child's.

"Home."

36. Home

El lets them lead her away, numb, body and mind alive with despair, grief. Perhaps it gives her strength enough to close the Gate. For good.

It's waiting for them, back in the lab, in the room with the Bath. She climbs through it, taking her first breath of fresh air in several weeks. She hardly notices. Her mouth tastes like blood. The others make their way through, too, weak and exhausted and weary but alive. Home, for the first time in four years.

When Will changed for the last time, when he called the Queen, he opened the gate.

She's closing it for the last time.

Enough.

El raises her hand, fingers outstretched, mustering up every ounce of strength she has left. The plant matter stretches across itself, pulling together like a stitched wound. The light inside it fades, and the vines hand limp and lifeless.

She steps back, wipes at the blood that begins to trickle out of her nose, and crumples to the ground. The world slips through her fingers, and everything goes dark.

. . .

Hopper speeds down Mirkwood. In his rearview mirror, he catches sight of another car, an old Ford pickup, it's doors thrown wide open. He slams on the brakes, pulling over. He walks toward the other car, gun clasped in one shaking hand. He peers inside. There's blood all over the passenger seat, and a bunch of broken glass. Candy wrappers and an empty bag of barbeque chips are strewn about the floor. He swallows, puzzled, and glances in the backseat.

There, on the scuffed leather, sits Dustin's old baseball cap. The one he wore when he was twelve, the one he still wears now.

Hopper's heart drops.

A blood-chilling shriek rips through the air, followed by a scream. More yelling. Hopper takes off into the woods, cold fear dragging him down. The kids are out there, alone. *His* kids. Henderson and probably Wheeler and Sinclair . . .

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck . . .

He stops when he reaches the treeline surrounding the chainlink.

And everything happens *all at once*. A scream builds in Hopper's throat.

The Wheeler kid goes down. At the same time, a huge sound, a *sonic boom* of sorts, if that's even the right word, shakes the Earth. In Hopper's memory, it's matched only by two other incidents. The first, the time he saw a meteor rocketing toward earth, lighting up the night sky a brilliant orange. It happened sometime in his childhood. It broke the sound barrier. The second, when El killed the Demogorgon. He claps his hands over his ears.

The monsters in the clearing begin to convulse. Their eyes roll, their mouths froth. They seem to be shrinking, collapsing in on themselves. Before his eyes, they revert back to humanoid forms. Hair sprouts from the top of their heads. They blink, massaging their heads and limbs, looking pained, confused.

Hopper rushes forward.

"Are you alright?" He yells, towards the kids. Henderson is helping a skinny redheaded girl to her feet. The whole front of her shirt is covered in blood. Sinclair is shaking, pointing at Mike.

"No." He yells. "Mike's hurt . . . he's hurt . . ." He yells, frantically. Hopper kneels beside the Wheeler boy. He's pale, bruised badly, and covered in blood that may or may not be his own. Hopper catches sight of the spiked bat lying in the dirt just inches from him, rusty nails also coated in blood. Several monster corpses are scattered about. They don't change, though. They're still monsters, limp and bloody and very very dead. It's somehow easier to deal with.

Hopper checks the boy's pulse. It beats steadily against his fingers. Hopper sighs, a wave of relief washing over him.

"He's alive." He says. "Just unconscious." Hopper straightens, pulling the military radio out of his pocket. He contacts every military official within fifteen miles of Hawkins, calling for an ambulance, police backup, anything.

Ten minutes later, they begin to hear sirens in the distance, accompanied by the drone of a helicopter. Sinclair helps him tend to the Pestilence-victims. They're returning to normal, disoriented and pale, but alright. He helps them to their feet, checks their vitals. Several EMTs arrive with stretchers and first aid kits, shouting to one another. Hopper stands back, letting them load the Wheeler boy onto a stretcher and cart him away. The other three kids, Henderson and Sinclair and the redhead, follow the paramedics back to the ambulance.

Hopper bites his tongue, suddenly exhausted, struggling to process everything.

It doesn't make any sense.

They changed back . . .

A twig breaks behind him, and he turns on his heel. His eyes widen as they land on the two people standing in front of him. They wear tattered clothes. Their hair is matted, their eyes wild, their faces and fingernails grimy.

"What . . ." He begins, and falls silent. The tallest of the pair steps forward, looking frightened.

"Please," she says, voice breaking, "help us."

. . .

They led him through the lab, down the stairs to the room with the isolation tank. The Gate. And there she was, lying on the ground, blood flowing steadily from her nose and her ears. Another of the ghostly people, a girl of thirteen or fourteen, probably, kept watch over her. Hopper would learn, later, the identity of these people.

Joyce, despite her grief, would open her home to them.

El's face was white and chalky, her eyes half-lidded, her lips purple. The front of her sweatshirt was completely soaked with dark blood. Too much blood. More than could come from her nose or ears alone. And for one terrible, fleeting moment he thought she was dead. And for another terrible moment the name that popped into his head was not Eleven but Sarah.

He would learn that Will's last transformation opened the Gate, and El used what remaining strength she had left to close it.

In the ambulance, as he sat with her, she floated between consciousness. And somewhere in the middle, she was coherent enough to tell him, in a detached, numb sort of way, that Will is dead.

Now, here he is, sitting by her bedside in the small hours of the morning, watching the clock as the hand travels from two

to two-thirty and so on. He can still hear the sirens every now and then. And soon there will be reporters and investigators, who will want a good story. They'll ask questions. Too many questions. He thinks of his mad break from the hospital up in Greenville. Hell, they might even arrest him.

He ought to take a vacation.

He clasps El's (good) hand in his own, and it's small and bony but warm. His throats tightens, which surprises him, because he's never considered himself to be all that close to this girl. The girl with the haunted eyes, the one with abilities that could damn well be called super powers. He sighs, looking at her, gazing at the swollen wound on her arm and the bruises and scars on her skin. She's so small, so sick.

For a split second he's holding Sarah's hand. He drops it, as if it's burning him. He blinks, rubbing his hands over the whiskers on his face, bowing out a long breath. He could really use a cigarette.

Outside, thunder claps and rattles the window panes. El shifts in her

sleep, whimpers, doesn't wake.

Hopper pushes Sarah from his mind and takes up her hand again. His mind jumps, randomly, to Will. The thought is so foul his brain immediately rejects it. He can't think about that now. Now is not the time, oh no. He's going to fall off the edge. Already has, probably.

El's hand tightens, almost imperceptibly, around his own. Or was it his imagination playing tricks?

...

Less than twelve hours later, the Department of Homeland Security will begin the clean-up. The *cover-up*. The citizens of Hawkins will be released from the "secure facilities" all across Roane County. The monster corpses will be removed, the damage repaired, the reporters pacified and witnesses quieted with threats or bribes or both.

Hopper will face the thing he dreads. He will be the bearer of bad news, again. And he'll hold Joyce while she weeps. He'll cry, himself, because maybe some small part of him loves her, and a part of him loved that kid, too.

Some promises can't be kept.

...

El swims between consciousness and slumber, fitful and restless. Sometimes, she can feel the stiff sheets encasing her body like a cocoon. She can hear the beeping heart monitor, or a distance voice. Once, she becomes quite aware of someone sitting beside her, holding her hand.

Other times, she's locked in a bizarre world of her own invention. A world where monsters whisper strange things in the dark and wander through shadowed forests turned upside down. A world where children without tongues wear hospital gowns stained red. A world where a pale, freckle-faced boy cries himself to sleep and another boy gives his life to save her own.

There are different variations of this world. Sometimes, it's softer. Lighter. In this world, she sleeps soundly, safe and warm, swathed in

a too-big borrowed sweater, beneath the cotton ceiling of a blanket fort. Soothed to sleep by a familiar voice painted in static. In this world, she lies on a carpeted floor and paints pictures, and the exhausted mother of two plus one arrives home from a twelve-hour shift at Melvald's General Store with a cigarette between her teeth. In this world, she sits patiently and attentively while the boys, her boys, teach her the basics of the not-quite-new-anymore Atari game system. In this world, her mother, her *real* mother, sends her to school with a kiss on the forehead and a gentle brush of the cheek. In this world, she is loved. She is safe and whole. And she belongs.

. . .

Mike jolts wake with a sharp intake of breath. He tries to sit up, and immediately stops, nauseated, when the room begins to spin in great, lazy circles. He twists around and promptly vomits all over the clean, white sheets. His fists clench, and he heaves until there's nothing left. The ache in his abdomen worsens, and his head begins to pound. Mike's throat burns, and his eyes sting with tears. He wipes his mouth, fumbling with the nurse call button. He presses it, and slumps back against the pillows. The lights are much too bright. And the room won't stop spinning . . .

A hospital. Another damn hospital.

His hand finds the back of his head, where a lumpy knob rises under the skin. There's a couple stitches, too. And his hair is matted with dried blood, and it crumbles beneath his fingertips.

The door swings open, and Mike nearly jumps five feet in the air. A nurse appears in the door, dressed in pale blue scrubs, her hair pulled back in a lopsided bun. Her move from his face to the vomit on the sheets, and she sighs sympathetically, brows knitting together.

"You're awake." She says, gently. "I'm glad. I was beginning to worry you'd never come around. How do you feel?"

"Like crap." He says. His voice is broken and raspy. The nurse clicks her tongue.

"You sustained quite the head injury. It stitched up nicely, though.

You'll be dizzy for a couple days. The other cuts and scrapes weren't deep enough to require too much attention. I cleaned you up, though. You'll be good as new in a week or two."

"What . . . what happened?" He says. The nurse frowns.

"I'm not sure I'm the right person to ask. They won't tell me much, honey. I'm sorry." Mike shrugs. The nurse gestures to the mess on the sheets.

"Why don't I go get someone to clean that up?"

Mike sighs, too exhausted and weak to be embarrassed.

"That would be wonderful."

. . .

Mike continues to slip in and out of sleep, his head aching, his thoughts muddled and slow. The next time he regains consciousness for more than a few minutes, Hopper is sitting in a chair at the foot of his bed. His shoulders are stooped, his eyes are bloodshot and red, from exhaustion or tears . . . Mike doesn't know. It's so strange, seeing the Chief sitting there like his own mother would, that he has to blink a couple times to make sure it's not some hallucination.

"Hopper?" He asks, struggling to sit up. The Chief jumps to his feet, looking weary.

"How're you feeling, kid? It's good to see your eyes."

Mike ignores him, cold fear settling into the pit of his stomach.

"Are they alive?"

Hopper hesitates before he speaks.

"Yes, they're alive. Max is being kept just a few doors down from you. She's got quite a few injuries, but she'll be alright. Dustin and Lucas have already been released. They're at home. Nancy, too, Mike they're okay."

An overwhelming wave of relief crashes over him. He blows out a long breath, squeezing his eyes shut.

"And, uh, there's something else you should know." Hopper says, slowly. "It's El. Mike . . . she came back. She's home."

Mike's eyes fly open. He gazes at Hopper with a new, almost manic longing in his eyes.

"Hopper . . . where is she?"

"Mike . . ."

"Where is she?" He's yelling now. Tears pour down his cheeks, and he's trembling badly, unable to keep his hands steady. A thousand emotions are erupting inside his chest, squeezing his lungs, making it hard to think. Hard to breathe.

She's home. She came back to him.

She's home.

He reaches for the IV in his arm and tugs it out, ignoring the brief pain and the various alarms that begin to beep. He gets to his feet, swaying a little as the room begins to spin again. He stops, willing the dizziness to fade.

"Mike, wait a minute."

"Hopper, tell me where she is . . ." Mike growls. He meets the Chief's eyes, confused by the grief in them, the pain . . .

The not-knowing scares him.

Hopper sniffs, shaking his head. He tries to tell the Wheeler boy about Will, about his death . . . He opens his mouth, but no sound comes out. Hopper avoids Mike's anxious gaze, staring at the floor.

"Hopper . . ."

"She's in room 304." He gets out, finally. *Now is not the time.*

Mike pushes the door open, slipping in sock feet as he runs down the hall. The numbers printed on the doors blur together.

He pauses outside her door, hand on the knob, steeling himself. He steps inside, holding his breath, eyes stinging with unshed tears.

She's sitting up. A nurse stands at her bedside, offering her a spoonful of ice chips. She takes the spoon in a thin, trembling hand. El turns quickly as the door creaks open. Mike's breath catches in the back of his throat.

The hospital gown she wears seems to smother her, hanging too loosely from her skeletal form. Her eyes are sunken too far, the bones in her cheeks too prominent. The bags under her eyes seem to weigh her down. She's too pale, too thin . . .

She's home.

He makes a strange choking noise, stepping towards her. She drops the spoon, reaches over to to detach herself from the various monitors. The nurse tries to stop her, but she's pushed backward several feet by some invisible force. (*El's telekinesis*)

El clambers out of bed, tripping over herself in the effort to close the space between them. Tears spring in her eyes, and her mouth forms a twisted smile.

She throws her arms around him, fingers grabbing fistfuls of his shirt. He clutches the small of her back, letting everything burst out of him. He starts to sob, and she's sobbing, too. They crash to the floor, knees hitting the tiles. He holds her on his lap, rocking her back and forth, burying his face in her long, matted hair. His fingers find the swollen puncture wounds in her arm, cleaned but unstitched and unbandaged. He takes her face in his hands and kisses her, but the kiss is punctured by their tears.

"El." He says, weakly. "You're safe. You're home. El . . .

El clings to him, pouring herself into his arms. She's shaking, violently. She raises her head, and one trembling hand, traces the cuts and bruises on his face, his brows his lips.

"You're real?" She asks, her voice wavering. Almost disbelieving. Mike laughs through his tears.

"Yeah, I'm real. I'm right here, El. I'm real."

She smiles, and dissolves into fresh tears, her knuckles turning white as she clings to him, her arms wrapped around his neck. She cries so hard it hurts.

"Mike," she says, voice breaking, "Will's dead."

. . .

He's stunned into a shocked sort of silence. He doesn't feel anything at first, which, in a way, is worse. He's too numb, too overwhelmed, to feel anything at all.

"What?" He says, hoarsely.

I heard her wrong, is all. Will's not dead. He can't be dead. He can't . . .

She shakes her head. Her mouth twists and warps into an agonized grimace.

"Will . . . I-I couldn't save h-him." She cries, covering her mouth with her hands.

The world shatters and falls down around him, then. He feels like he's witnessing a car crash in slow-motion. He's in the road, watching the glass fly in every direction, watching the tires spin out on the sun-beaten asphalt. There's fire behind in his eyes, lead in his limbs. Every nerve, every cell and neuron and organ is lost in the flames. Sitting on the cool tiles of that hospital rooms, with his heart beating too fast and the sound of El's strangled weeping tearing a hole in his chest, he swears he can smell the burning rubber, the gasoline, the smoke.

What a strange thought . . .

. . .

The full realization hits him two days later, after he is released from

the hospital. His mother's waiting to drive him home, her cheeks wet with tears. He greets the rest of his family outside of their house at the end of the cul-de-sac. Nancy clings to him, weeping. Holly hugs him around the waist. His father ruffles his hair. He doesn't cry.

He tropes up the stairs and heads straight for his room, longing for the solitude, the darkness, the time to think or cry or sleep without interruption. He pushes open the door, noting the layer of dust that lingers over every surface.

Mike bumps into his desk and stubs his toe. A pile of haphazardly stacked papers and notebooks crash to the floor.

"Shit!" He yells, grabbing his foot.

"Mike, are you alright?" His mother's muffled voice inquires, worriedly, from downstairs.

"Yeah, I'm fine." He replies, wincing, massaging his foot. He stoops down, beginning to gather up the papers spread across the carpeted floor. He picks up a slightly wrinkled sheet of copy paper and turns it over. He freezes. All the oxygen in the room seems to dissipate.

He stares down at one of Will's drawings, art for a D&d campaign. Mike's knees hit the carpeted floor, and his fists clench around the paper, reducing it to an unrecognizable, crumpled ball.

The truth, the realization, crashes over him like a wave, breaking over his head, dragging him down, down, down . . . He struggles to draw a breath, choking on his tears.

He shatters.

He clutches the drawing in one clenched fist, eyes screwed up against the fat tears that pour from the corners of his eyes, nose running, gasping for air. His breath is like a sharp stone lodged deep inside his throat.

It's the worst pain in the world.

He stays there, on the floor, with that damn drawing in his hand, for hours. He cries so hard he barely makes it to the bathroom before he

vomits once again, unloading his lunch into the ghostly white porcelain toilet bowl. He slumps back, sweat glistening on his forehead, intermingling with the tears and snot. Thoughts, *memories, really*, of Will swirl inside his head. And it hurts. It hurts *so* bad. He winds up on the bathroom floor, hand clamped over his mouth as the strangled cries and gasps burst from his lips. The seconds bleed into minutes, an hour . . .

And he cries himself into oblivion.

. . .

Mike wakes, eyes stinging and head pounding, still curled on the tiled floor of the bathroom. He drags himself to his feet. He realizes, with a slow kind of surprise, that Will's drawing is still crumbled in the palm of his hand. He unravels it, staring at it dumbly for a moment. Tentatively, he traces the lines with his fingers, noting the places where his tears fell on the page, where the ink began to bleed . . .

Mike smooths the paper over his knee and returns it to his desk. He bends down and picks up the remaining fallen papers and notebooks, returning them to their original place in a neat stack.

He peels off his clothes, which smell like hospital and *burning rubber and gasoline and smoke* . . . and climbs beneath the sheets of his bed. Immediately, he slips into a deep and dreamless sleep.

. . .

El is released from the hospital a day after Mike. Terry and Becky drive to pick her up. They're coming straight from Roane City, from the "secure facility" where they were held. They're in the waiting room, pale and worried. Hopper informs her of their arrival, and she runs down the hall so fast she almost slips in her socks. She launches herself into their arms, and they're both crying and covering her with kisses and she's crying, too.

"I missed you. I love you. I missed you so much." She saying it over and over again. After a few minutes of group hugging and fussing, Becky steps back, eyes glossy with unshed tears. Terry embraces her daughter and speaks the first words that've come out of her mouth

since her daughter's disappearance.

. . .

Mike sleeps through a full day. Nobody bothers him. He's cried himself out, thoroughly exhausted. He doesn't dream. No nightmare could trump his reality.

When he wakes, he heaves himself out of bed, pulling on a pair of sweatpants and a possibly-clean Hawkins High t-shirt. He staggers down the stairs, moving blindly toward the kitchen like a dog following a scent on the wind. His appetite has returned, and aggressively so. He paws through the cabinets for awhile and finds nothing but a half-empty box of stale Cheez-Its and a jar of peanut butter. He'll take what he can get.

In the entry room, he can hear the sound of the front door opening and closing.

"Mom?" He calls, mouth full of Cheez-Its. "Nancy?"

He shuffles into the entryway.

El stands by the front door, one hand still on the knob. She wears one of his hoodies and a pair of overlarge basketball shorts. Her hair has been brushed through, and it falls in lazy, chocolate brown curls over her shoulders. Her arm is heavily bandaged, and some color has returned to her cheeks. His heartbeat speeds up, as it always does when she's near.

"Hey." She says, tentatively. He doesn't respond, only opens his arms. She doesn't hesitate to walk straight into them, wrapping her slender arms around his middle. Mike rests his cheek against the top of her head, closing his eyes. He breathes in the scent of her; he listens to the rhythmic sound of her breathing, noticing the way the slow movement of air in and out of her nose ruffles the hair that sweeps across his forehead . . .

Mike and El remain in the entryway for a long while, not talking, not daring to move for fear of disturbing the other, dreading the moment they will have to let go. There's no tears between them this time, only

warmth, safety.

Home.

. . .

Mike lies on the La-Z-Boy, and El lies beside him, her head resting over the place where his heart beats, slow and steady and strong. His thumb traces her brows, her lips. Gently, as if the simple act of touching her would cause her to break into a million tiny pieces. Slowly, he reaches up and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

She's staring at him with an intensity so great he has to resist the urge to look away. A million unspoken things pass between them. It's hard to put into words, really, how much he missed her. And there's an ache in Mike's chest that won't go away.

"El?"

"Mmmmmm?"

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

And then they're kissing. Her hand is curled and resting on his chest, his hands are in her hair. When she pulls away, he's surprised to find that he's crying. She reaches up and brushes away the tears on his cheeks with shaking fingers. There's a new kind of hunger in her eyes, and Mike is becoming increasingly, distractedly aware of the gentle pressure of her chest and hips against his body.

She settles back down against him, returning her head to the place above his beating heart, interlacing her fingers with his. She closes her eyes, and he keeps stroking her hair, and a terrible ache grows inside his chest. Because he missed her *so damn much*, and he's not sure he'll ever let her go. Not again.

And right now, he doesn't have to.

Her breathing gets slower, deeper. His fingers find the edge of the bandage on her arm. And tears well in his eyes, looking at it. Another

scar.

Mike pushes that too-familiar horde of awful thoughts from his mind. He leans back against the slightly worn fabric of the La-Z-Boy and closes his eyes. El shifts, half-asleep, her hand tightening around his own.

"Mike?" She mumbles, sleepily.

"El?"

"Stay."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

He drifts off.

37. The Last Campaign

Hopper jumps every time the phone rings. Every time there's a knock at the door. But no officials show up at his house. No arrest comes. Life carries on as usual. The headlines read "Scientists Find Cure For Pestilence Afflicting Small Indiana Town". A big fat load of horseshit, but believable. And safe.

He has three more things to deal with. The other test subjects, those people that returned with El from the Upside Down. They're living with Joyce, and recovering.

Their problems are over, for the time being. When the Queen died, it's grasp on the Vessels shattered. They're recovering, returning to their families and their lives. End. Of. Story. MK Ultra is no more, and El is no longer to blame for the Pestilence. She's safe. They're safe.

Hawkins is rebuilding, recovering. Healing. Just like Hopper is healing. Just like Joyce is healing, and Jonathan. He paid a visit to the Ives household this morning. El's arm is almost good as new, but there's a scar now. Another one to add to the list. And the Wheeler kid looks a hell of a lot better, too. He hasn't seen them apart since she came back.

He buys a new pack of cigarettes, lights one, and throws the rest of them in the lake. He supposes he ought to quit.

...

Mike, El, Lucas, Max, and Dustin gather together for the first time since El's return on a quiet Saturday afternoon. They embrace at the bottom of the steps, hands clasped, tears running down their faces. And it's weird, because six is now five and they can all feel it. Even Max, who didn't know Will like the others did.

Mike holds a D&D campaign in Will's honor. He picks up the Will the Wise figurine and turns it over in his fingers, swallowing hard. Dustin touches his shoulder, reassuringly. Mike clears his throat, blinking back tears, and dissolves into his role as the Game Master, taking on

some of his old confidence. He does the voices of the characters, and lays out a story bigger than the sum of his parts. Tentative smiles stretch over their faces. El holds his hand. And for a fleeting moment all five of them can feel Will, sitting to Lucas' right, bent over the game board and talking excitedly with the rest of them.

Mike is overcome with a powerful, bittersweet certainty. That this is the last D&D campaign he will ever create, and this is the last time they will ever play, all together, like this.

He gives El's hand a reassuring squeeze, one she returns with a teary smile. He looks around the table, at all of them, feeling very young and at the same time, somehow, very old.

They all stare back at him, most with tears in their eyes, looking at him with a sort of hard resolve and . . . maybe something called love. Because Mike is the centerpiece of their circle, the leader. He's the Game Master. They'll follow him until the end. And they love him. They love each other.

They'll move on. They'll grow up, grow apart or grow together, and they'll move on.

Mike's last campaign would be his greatest, if it weren't for the missing player.

. . .

They're in no hurry to hold Will's funeral. Particularly because there's no body to bury. So the date is set for the fourteenth of June, a Tuesday.

Joyce wakes early on the morning of the service. She drags herself out of bed and pads into the kitchen quietly, pausing to steal a glance at the three strangers sleeping on the floor in Will's room. Six. Seven. Nine. They're staying with her, until things settle down. Until Hopper can get the kids in foster homes and the woman, well . . . until they can get her back into the real world.

She makes herself a cup of coffee, hot and black, and pauses at the kitchen sink. She gazes out of the dusty kitchen window. It faces the

woods behind their house. She can see the flag that belongs to Castle Byers flitting lazily in the morning breeze. Forgetting the coffee, she walks across the room and pulls the door open, moving on autopilot through the backyard, toward her sons' old fort.

It's dank and damp in there, littered with dried leaves. The books are dusty, the old drawings, scrawled across printer paper, are dirty and yellowing. Nobody's been in here in months, maybe years. Her boys are grown up, now.

Her boy.

He will never celebrate his seventeenth birthday.

The thought comes out of nowhere, and it hits her in the stomach like a sucker-punch, knocking all the air from her lungs.

She sinks to her knees, reaching for something to keep her grounded, at least a little it sane, as her world careens out of control and turns upside down.

Her hand closes around Will's stuffed animal, a lion, and hugs it to her chest. She bites on her tongue, hard, to keep the sobs from bursting out of her mouth. But they do anyway, and she can taste the metallic tang of her own blood.

Joyce cries for a long time, and the pain in her chest is unbelievable. She tries to suck in a breath, and finds it almost impossible. Red flowers bleed across her vision, and she buries her head in the stuffed lion's matted fur.

Her boy.

Jonathan finds her there nearly two hours later, shivering despite the warmth of the morning, snot staining her upper lip, eyes reddened and bloodshot. He kneels on the ground beside her and she holds him. And they cry together.

Her boy.

They cry until there are no more tears left to shed, and the pain in her chest is there but less, somehow. And maybe they can get

through this. Together.

. . .

Mike drives to El's house on the morning of the funeral. He's dressed in a nice black suit and a too-tight neck tie. The morning is warm.

He parks the car on the curb and gets out. She's waiting for him on the porch, dressed in a black dress with tiny purple flowers stitched around the hem. Her bandage is gone, her bruises fading. Her hair is pulled up in intricate braids. He approaches her and takes her hands in his own, brushing his lips against her cheek, gently. She smiles and hugs him, wrapping her arms around his middle.

The drive is bathed in silence, not entirely uncomfortable. She gazes out the window, watching the sun rays glitter between the trees. The streets are fairly empty, the town quiet. He pulls up near the church. Already, people are gathering on the grass, like flocks of black birds huddled together. She squints, staring across the courtyard. She can just make out the glint of Max's fiery red hair and Dustin's baseball cap. She takes a deep breath. Their friends are here. Alone, it would be harder to face.

Mike shuffles around the front of the car and opens the door for her, offering his hand. Tears glitter in his eyes, and she can feel the gentle hum in the back of her mind. His presence is there, strong and steady, as it was before.

She takes his hand and holds fast.

Together?

She nods, not speaking. She doesn't have to.

Always.

A/N: It's finished. I think I should give my fingers (and my heart/emotions) a rest. Please leave a review. I really appreciate the comments and feedback you guys give me. Even if you've never left a review before, PLEASE, I'd love to hear what you have to say. I hope you all enjoy season 2, and that it's every bit

as AWESOME as I think it's going to be. Thank you for your interest and your feedback!